



WELSH BRIDGE

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MIKE HIRST

Wales has had many talented bridge players, but few have brought to the game the same adventurousness and all-round exuberance as characterises the approach of Mike Hirst. Mike has represented Wales in the Camrose on 42 occasions, winning 13 of those matches. He also represented his country in a host of other international tournaments from the late 60s onwards. Even today, when he plays in few major events, Mike ranks 4th amongst current Welsh Grand Masters. But Mike is as far from being a metronomic Master Point accumulator as it is possible to imagine. For him, bridge is a game to be enjoyed, and friendships forged at the table are cherished along with competitive success.

GD: Could you tell me a bit about your early life?

MH: I was born in Castleford in Yorkshire in 1936. My grandfather was Chairman of Castleford rugby league club. I still follow them. I started playing bridge when I was eleven. My parents played bridge with the next door neighbours, but I mostly taught myself - my friends and I got a book. We were all keen golfers, but if there was a cloud in the sky we played bridge.

GD: When did you first play competitively?



MH: I remember when I was sixteen I came 3rd in the Yorkshire Pairs Championships. Harold Franklin was running it and he shouted at me for being late. That upset me and I revoked, which cost us the Championship. I've still got my first Master Point certificate - 'Club Master 1966'. I was a junior and it said I had 645 Master Points. I was proud of that. But I played golf and rugby mainly. After I left school I didn't play much bridge - I was too busy working. I got a job with Woolworths as a Management Trainee. Then I switched to Beechams and in 1960 they moved me to South Wales.

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I lived in digs in Penarth. My landlady said: 'I'll charge you £1.50 a week'. I said: 'Make it £2 and do my washing'. 'Done', she said.

GD: What prompted you to resume playing bridge?

MH: I joined Penarth Golf Club and there was a guy there called Bill Griffith. He said to me one day: 'Can you play cards?' 'I play every game you can think of', I said. 'Can you play bridge?' 'I can', I said. 'We'll go along to Cardiff Bridge club on Monday'. The club was in The Walk in those days. I remember that first evening Bill opened 1NT and I responded 3C, which when I started we used to play as strong Stayman - 2C weak Stayman, 3C strong Stayman. But it had all changed between 1956, when I learned to play, and 1963. No-one played strong Stayman any more. But Bill and I had a couple of games and I got the bug. I said to the Steward: 'If you get anyone who wants a game, give me a ring and I'll be happy to play'. So he introduced me to a lady called Peggy Fletcher. She took me under her wing.

GD: When did you start to play with Patrick Jourdain?

MH: The Steward rang me one night in 1965: 'What you doing tonight, Mike?' 'Nothing'. 'Well, I've got a game for you with a young guy who's come down from Scunthorpe, name of Patrick Jourdain'. Patrick worked for British Steel in those days and we hit it off from the start. One of the first events we played in was the British Juniors - under thirty-five in those days. Cansino, Collings and all those great players were playing. We finished 6th. I was very pleased - I don't know whether Patrick was. Anyway, we had some very good results. We were a partnership as far as I was concerned, although whenever there was an international the selectors used to pick him with someone else. But in

1969 I entered the trials with Patrick and we were selected for the Camrose.

GD: Who was that against?

MH: Our first match was against Northern Ireland. That's when I met Desmond Deery. He was a famous guy in those days - he could win a match on his own. Anyway, he says to me: 'Are you Mike Hirst?' 'I am'. 'Well', he says, 'we're playing together this weekend, so you'd better know, the drink of the Irish is Chivas Regal'. 'Well, I'm game for anything', I said. So we went to the bar: 'Two Chivas Regals, please'. That was my introduction to the Camrose. In those days we didn't finish until two or three o'clock in the morning.

GD: Who were your team-mates?

MH: Johnson and McAndrew, and Hamilton and Samuels. I don't remember the result.

GD: Too many Chivas Regals?

MH: Possibly. Anyway, I played with Patrick until 1973. We played with Johnson and McAndrew - they were a very good pair. That used to be our Gold Cup team. Then Johnson left to live in South Africa, so I played a bit with McAndrew. This was when Patrick went to live in Scotland for four years. After that I played a bit with Alan Pierce, when Tony Casey decided to pack in. I even had one match with David Carlisle, who lived in Wales at that time. By the end of it I was a nervous wreck, the same as him. We went up to North Wales to play against Scotland. It was a disaster.

GD: How did you get on with Alan Pierce?

MH: I enjoyed playing with Alan. I remember one Camrose match we got to Seven Spades because I got the response to Blackwood wrong. But Alan made it on a squeeze and it won us the match. Alan drank brandy, so after this hand I said to the bar lady, whom I knew: 'I want you to

get us the best brandy you've got.' Well, about half an hour went by and I was getting worried. But eventually she came back: 'We've been down in the cellar', she says, 'and we've found you a bottle of 1888'. 'Right', I said, 'you'd better make them doubles. How much is that?' 'Sixty-four pounds.' But Alan had played very well - he was very good - and winning a Camrose match is worth celebrating, isn't it?

GD: How about Welsh events?

MH: I've won the Welsh Cup twelve times. Patrick's won it twelve times as well now. The twelfth time, he rang me up to tell me he'd equalled my record. I said to him: 'Patrick, I've won it playing in all kinds of terrible teams. You always play with the best players available. Don't talk to me about records', I said. He's got more Master Points than me now as well. I've still got my Grand Master certificate - 'Grand Master 34'. That was in 1980. I was the 34th to achieve it. Bernard Goldenfield said to me: 'I'm Grand Master 39'. 'That's nothing', I said, 'I'm Grand Master 34'. I overtook Patrick once, but he plays every weekend now so I've got no chance. But I think Patrick's a marvellous player. We won the Brighton teams in 1971, playing with David Hamilton and Cyril Samuels. I was partnering Cyril, and in the last match he took me out of 3NT into Four Spades. The opponents doubled, and I was so annoyed with Cyril, because I knew it was the wrong contract, that I redoubled. Anyway, they made a mistake in defence and Cyril made it. And because I'd redoubled, we won the Brighton teams. If I hadn't redoubled, we wouldn't have won.

GD: Have you played in many international tournaments?

MH: I got a bronze medal in the European Common Market, partnering Phil Laddin. That was playing with Patrick and David Hamilton. Phil Laddin never put a foot

wrong throughout the whole event. And I played with Robert Upton in the World Pairs in Biarritz. We qualified for the semi-final, and there were forty pairs to go through to the final but we finished forty-first.

GD: Any other memories of the Camrose?

MH: I can remember one match against Scotland when on the last board I played in One Spade doubled. Patrick was playing in the other room and the Scots had bid to Two Spades, but Patrick forgot to double. Anyway, that went three off. I had to go just one down in One Spade doubled for us to win the match, and I managed it.

GD: Any bad ones?

MH: I remember in 1973 I was playing with Patrick against England. I think we'd won the first two matches, but then I bid Four Spades over their Four Hearts, when neither contract was making. And the next hand I led a spade against 3NT, when if I'd led Patrick's suit he had Ace, King to five and they'd have gone down. They dropped me after that. I didn't play the rest of the weekend. That was the famous occasion I met this bird and we drank champagne all night. Patrick saw me walking across the fields to the team hotel at 9.30 in the morning.

GD: With a smile on your face.

MH: Probably. But I was out of favour for a while after that.

GD: When did you start to play with Jim Luck?

MH: Jim was quite high up in the Patent Office, and he got moved with them to Newport. We started playing together around 1992. Jim and I had some great results together. We beat England, and I remember Tom Townsend saying that if he



ever lost to Wales again, he'd give up the game. Well he did lose to us after that, but I wasn't there to remind him. But my best memory playing with Jim was when we won the EBU Grand Masters. It was my 60th birthday. He's a nice guy, Jim, and a very good player. When we missed a year, the Welsh selectors made us play in that ridiculous pre-trial. They said they'd pay our expenses - I'm still waiting for those. They had an English pair in to make up the numbers and they bid a Six Diamond contract against us that nobody else bid. So that was that. That was the end of it.

GD: How long have you and Ann been together?

MH: We've been married twenty-six years. We got together in 1979, at Llangollen. I'd just won the Men's Pairs with Barry Clowes. He got rushed to hospital and Ann went with him. She and her friend, who was another doctor, looked after him. That was Barry's last game of bridge. I said to Ann - 'Give us your number, and I'll give you a ring on Monday.' So I rang her on the Monday and I said: 'May I take you out to lunch?' She said: 'Where are you thinking of? You're in Cardiff and I'm in Liverpool.' I said: 'The Chateau Impney in Droitwich - one hundred and sixty miles for you and one hundred and sixty miles for me'. 'All right, we'll meet there'. So I rang them and I said: 'I want a nice bottle of champagne on ice.' So we had lunch, and we had a walk, and she said: 'All right, I'll come down and live with you.' 'Right', I said. Easy going.

GD: Do you and Ann get on well at the bridge table?

MH: She wasn't a strong player at first, but she's a very good player *now*. She got better and better. She was in the Welsh team that won the Lady Milne. That was when Jessie and Jean Newton were playing. We've won loads of things. We've won the Cambria twice in the last three years. We

won the Pairs at the Blackpool Year End Congress. Paul Hackett was in 6NT and he had a club suit with Axxx opposite Qxxx, and he played the Ace and then towards his Queen. Ann had KJx in front of the Queen, but she played the Jack on the second round. Hackett didn't think she'd do that, holding the King, so he ducked and went off in a cold contract. She's a wonder, she is. She's lost a bit of interest now, but she did it. She got there.

GD: Who are the best players you've played against?

MH: I've played against Flint, Cansino, Collings, Rose, Forrester, Brock.....

GD: So who impressed you the most?

MH: The most difficult to play against was Forrester. He towered - it was his table presence. I partnered him once and he said: 'Every card has a meaning'. Bloody tires you out. And Reese was a friend of mine. I introduced him to Patrick. They wrote a book together - Squeeze Play Made Easy.

GD: And who's been your favourite partner?

MH: Patrick, I think. He wrote a book on me! I said to him once: 'All those things you wrote about - stepping-stone squeezes and all that - they happened when you were playing with me.' He was always very excited when those things happened. When they worked he was over the moon. I think he's a fantastic player. I've played in I don't know how many Championships with him. In 1970 we went to Stockholm to play in the World Pairs. There were about a hundred and sixty pairs, and after four boards we were 2nd. It was barometer scoring, so you knew how you were doing.

GD: Did you hold your position?

MH: No, we came about 130th.

GD: What are your main strength and weaknesses as a player?

MH: I've never been put off by anyone, in any game. And I loved defending. I was good at finding leads that were a bit off-

beat. If you get off to the wrong lead, everything falls apart. I can still play well, except I make silly mistakes. I think in bridge there should be time faults. How can you enjoy it if you sit there for hours without moving? If you had to play every hand in six or seven minutes or take an average, that would suit me fine. I can remember playing with Barry Clowes, when Cyril Samuels had a two-way finesse for a Queen to make his contract. Cyril was thinking and thinking, and Barry said: 'Excuse me, I'm going for a walk', and he left the table. And Cyril thought, well, he wouldn't do that if he had the Queen, so he played me for the Queen. But of course Barry had the Queen. The game's psychological, isn't it? If you get into the bidding on crap hands, it's very rarely you get carted, and it helps your partner to know where your values are. You have to play them at their own game. We seem to lie down.

GD: You mean in Wales - that Welsh players are too cautious?

MH: 100% too cautious. And you know why? - they don't want to be criticised. Playing against Armstrong and Kirby, I bid to Seven Hearts. They wrote it up in Bridge magazine and said Hirst didn't know what he was doing - his partner might have held five small hearts. Rubbish. I knew Jim had the King, and I had AQ, so that was enough. You don't get anywhere by being too cautious. I remember playing against Monty Rosenberg. I was playing with Jim, and when the dummy went down I thought Christ Almighty, I'm at least five off here. But every single card was in the right place, and I made it. You should never give up, no matter how bad the contract - and I've been in some bad ones.

GD: How do you view the International bridge scene now, from a Welsh perspective?

MH: In my opinion, they've never picked the strongest team to play for Wales - never.

They have these trials, and the pair that should win have a bad game, or an unlucky game - it happens. You've got to play at least ninety-six boards, like a full international. And I always feel people think they're better than they are. We should have won that Commonwealth event in Manchester five years ago - Rees and Kurbalija played very well.

GD: How do you view Wales' prospects for the future?

MH: Dafydd Jones is a good player, but apart from him I can't see any young players coming through. I haven't seen a young player, say under thirty, who's any good. The average age at my golf club is fifty-nine. The average age at most bridge clubs must be sixty-nine. If you want to play in the EBU Seniors Congress in Eastbourne you've got to enter months in advance. But bridge in Wales is the weakest it's ever been. I always feel the ladies could have done better as well, if certain players could adapt to playing with certain players.

GD: Have you involved yourself in bridge administration?

MH: I was BBL selector for a time. It's more complicated now, with sponsorship coming in. Sponsorship is fine, as long as you don't have to pick them. Anyway, there's no-one to sponsor a team in Wales. If I was wealthy enough I wouldn't mind sponsoring a team, but I'd have to pick it.

GD: Perhaps if you win the Lottery?

MH: That's right. I'm captain of Cardiff Rugby Club this year, and I'm captain of my golf club next year. When I've finished those two I might have a go.

GD: The next Chairman of the Welsh selectors?

MH: I wouldn't mind. I'd be quite happy to put some work into it. I know who can play, and who should play with who. I did offer ten years ago, but I wanted carte blanche. You've got to know the players. Maybe after next year, if they ask me nicely.