

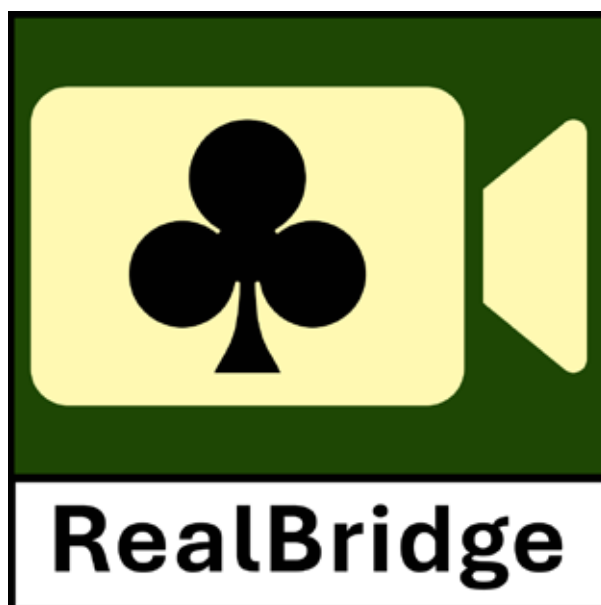
IBPA Personalities of the Year

RealBridge:

Andy Bowles (Operations Director)

Graham Hazel (CEO and CTO)

Shireen Mohandes (Commercial Director)



LOCKDOWN PROJECT

In April 2020, Graham Hazel, an English bridge player and software developer, found himself at home with children to teach and a day job, with some time on his hands. Like many, he was trying to play more online bridge, and finding that it was okay, but not quite like the real thing. What do you do when the software doesn't do what you want? If you're Graham, you write your own. Two months later, he had the core of what you see at the table today – an interface for playing bridge, with built-in audio and video. He showed it to Shireen Mohandes and she was instantly smitten.

A LONG HOT SUMMER

They spent the summer designing and building the rest of the system, testing exhaustively on different types of hardware, and spreading the word about the new platform. When everyone else in the UK was gingerly edging out of lockdown, they were still at home, staring at a screen with twelve RealBridge windows open, adding features and testing. RealBridge wanted a platform that was good for everybody, so they consulted everybody: players, tournament directors, teachers, club owners, and major-event organisers. Everybody had ideas: mostly good; some challenging; others impractical.

A group of about 30 people from around the world rallied round and joined in the testing sessions for which RealBridge offers their thanks. Clubs in England, Norway, Germany, Australia and India started running games on the beta version. National bridge organisations got interested, starting with the English Bridge Union and the USBF. Both of these organisations were very supportive, and started running events on RealBridge

LAUNCH

In November 2020 RealBridge launched the platform commercially. By now there was a solid core of clubs and teachers using the platform and had been used successfully for two national events and one (nervous) international one.

THE FIRST FEW YEARS

Four years on, and RealBridge has been adopted by more than 500 clubs and teachers, about 35 NBOs, several zonal organisations, and the World Bridge Federation.

On the technological side, RealBridge has added a lot of useful functionality for teaching, high-level bridge, everyday club bridge, and vugraph.

Their objective is that everybody in the world to be able to play on RealBridge, and they want every event played on RealBridge to be a success. To that end they used to tell people “If we’re awake we’ll answer the phone,” but that has morphed into just, “We’ll answer the phone.”

Not all of what RealBridge does is commercial – all of the team are bridge players, and they care about bridge. They offer the platform to run free international junior events, and organise games that bring together people from different countries (including the famous or infamous “Up Over versus Down Under” competition, where players from the UK and Ireland took on players from Australia, New Zealand and South Africa in an 800-player extravaganza). If someone runs an online fundraiser for junior bridge, you’ll probably find them in the background helping out with the technical side. They also sponsor other bridge technology developers, by helping them with IT resources and financial support.

WHAT’S NEXT?

Online bridge will never replace face-to-face bridge, but it doesn’t have to be a poor relation. RealBridge is determined to be a big part of the future of bridge. RealBridge is there for a small club to run their three-table pairs without having to go out in the cold, for the WBF to run championship events with teams from all over the world, and for everything in between. They are continuously working on new features.

WHO HAS HELPED TO SHAPE REALBRIDGE?

RealBridge has had huge amounts of advice and support from players, directors and organisers at every level. Amongst NBOs and major event-organisers, RealBridge’s greatest helpers have been Jan Martel at the USBF, the EBU led by Gordon Rainsford, Marianne Harding from Norway, Pierre Schmidt from France, Sukrit Vijayakar’s Bridge from Home team in India, Sus Vang from Denmark, Linnea Edlund from Sweden, Gary Barwick and Matt McManus in Australia, and many others.

IT’S NEVER TOO LATE

Finally, RealBridge was featured on the TV news in the UK: In 2021 Bessie Hyder, from the North of England, had her 106th birthday. She celebrated in style, by eating some cake, then joining a game on RealBridge.