

HISTORY OF BRIDGE

Although bridge is a relative young game the origin is not clear and different versions were given by different authors. After thorough investigation by the staff of the Voerpunt Bridge Academy the following most probable course of the history was taken mainly from the different descriptions as published in The Official Encyclopedia of Bridge, complemented with information found on the Internet, and by cross-checked mouth of elderly bridge-players from earlier generations.

Sir James Paget, 1st Baronet (11 January 1814 – 30 December 1899) was a British surgeon and pathologist and deemed one of the surgical greats in England in the nineteenth century. In 1843 he referred to playing "bridge" when he described a weekend's recreation in a letter to his fiancée whom he married in 1844: "We improved our minds in the intellectual games of bagatelle and bridge for about two hours – admirable occupations for reasonable creatures." It is unclear whether the bridge that he played was reference to the same game we have in mind but no other game was or is known by a similar name. It is a faint clue with no more information available. Nevertheless, there is no reason not to accept the possibility.

In chronological order, whether the following is a legend or contains at least a bid of truth, could not be ascertained. Several elderly South African bridge-players who play at home heard this handing down from their grandparents as real history.

It is told that a Russian, claiming to come from a town or settlement at the estuary of the Amur River in Russia, introduced a card game called Biritch to people in South Africa in 1851. The game did not really become popular at that stage. To the English in South Africa the word biritch sounded like bridge and they accepted the spelling they knew, that is bridge. However, it reminded the Afrikaners of the English word "bridge" and since about 1834 till 1910 they were in a political struggle with England. In spite of the Russian assuring them it means announcement (of the trump suit) they translated it to "brug", the Afrikaans for bridge. That bridge was initially introduced to South Africa by a Russian is the reason why the Afrikaans bridge terminology was not influenced by the French terminology as in the case of the Netherlands and Germany, related languages. But because South Africa, in those years, was not deemed to be a first world country and communication was poor, no further thought was given to this piece of history.

An Istanbul resident, Metin Demirsar, reported that as part of a course on Ottoman history and architecture his guide mentioned that the card game was played by soldiers in the Crimean War (1854-1856) where they learned the game from Russian prisoners. Mrs Marion Harding of the National Army Museum in London confirmed that some 14 000 British troops concentrated around Constantinople in 1854, and a number of officers were there for considerable periods. According to Funk and Wagnalls Encyclopedia there were three times as many French troops in the Crimea. More French soldiers than English soldiers therefore learned the game of bridge (or biritch) from Russian prisoners. This is why many French terms were accepted in European countries.

This game of Russian origin came to Istanbul in about 1860-65 where it was called something like British, Britch, or Biritch. When the Western European nations got hold of the game they changed it to a word that they knew: Bridge (folk etymology, apparently). Once the Western Europeans took up the game, Biritch became Bridge through a process known as folk etymology, which is a fancy way of saying that people often substitute a word they do know for one they don't, even when the substitution makes no sense.

A claim of the existence of bridge appears in the introduction to Modern Bridge by "Slam" (pseudonym for E Chittenden) published in London in 1901: "Bridge, known in Turkey as 'Britch,' has been played in South-Eastern Europe ever since the early sixties." (1860's).

In 1869, Christian Vanderheid, an Austrian author, published his *Gründlicher Selbstunterricht zur Erlernung des Jarolasch oder das russische Whist* [Extensive Self-teaching for the Learning of Yeralash or Russian Whist], published in Vienna by Wenedikt. The booklet in the Bridge Collection Amsterdam, which is part of the Special Collections of the Amsterdam University Library, points definitely to Russia as country of origin, and at the same time confirming a recent presumption that the origins of the game must be found in that country before the middle of the 19th century.

His thirty-two-page booklet contains the rules of a game called Jarolasch which, apart from the playing with a dummy, is almost identical to Biritch, as described by Collinson in 1886 (following). The Jarolasch game possesses already the following characteristic features: a rudimentary form of bidding, the possibility to play at no-trumps, a suit hierarchy, slam bonuses, (re)doubling and scoring under and above the line. Even playing with a dummy is touched upon, but only as a variation if only three players are available. The name Jarolasch most probably can be translated to Goulash.

Authorities like Oswald Crawford, Milton Work, Emanuel Lasker and George Hervey, pointed to the younger Russian game of Vint as possible ancestor. Both the rules of Jarolasch and the fact that, like Biritch, the second name of Jarolasch is 'Russian Whist', indicate undeniably that the origin of most elements which are now typical for the game of Bridge, must indeed be situated in Russia.

This is conclusive evidence that the archetype of bridge existed already in 1869, 17 years earlier than the year 1886 in which John Collinson published his pamphlet! But as Vanderheid, in 1869, is testifying of the game's popularity in the German speaking parts of Europe, it must have been introduced there long before, and therefore the game of Jarolasch must have been played in Russia still many years earlier.

Daily Telegraph of November 1932 carried an article by O H van Millingen who lived in Constantinople in 1879/1880 who remembered "a very interesting game called Biritch". He included a letter dated January 7, 1922, of his friend Edouard Graziani who at that time worked for the Italian Embassy as a translator and was one of the best bridge players of the Cercle d'Orient. Graziani played the game of bridge for the first time in 1873 at the home of Georges Coronio, manager of the Bank of Constantinople, when a Rumanian financier named Serghiadi taught bridge to the foursome. "After Constantinople", Graziani wrote, "bridge came first to Cairo, from where it conquered the Riviera, Paris, London and then New York."

According to a letter published in Bridge Magazine in 1932, Frank J Nathan had played in the first game in England in 1892 at St George's Club, Hanover Square. It was introduced by a Colonel Studdy of the Royal Artillery who said it was of Levantine origin. He had learned it in the trenches at Plevna during the Russian-Turkish War of 1877-1878.

A four page pamphlet titled Biritch, or Russian Whist, is the second earliest publication of the rules of bridge. Authorship has been traced to John Collinson of London, in whose name copyright was entered July 14, 1886. These rules have a remarkable resemblance of the later Auction Bridge which developed from Biritch. Despite existence of the historic pamphlet, derivation of the name bridge from Biritch was long disputed on the ground that no such word existed in Russian.

Research by Robert True in the early 1970's found that earlier Russian dictionaries did include the term biritch, defined as announcer, making it a logical name for a game which introduced the idea of announcing the declaration at which the hand was to be played. This coincides with the name of the game in South Africa.

Biritch in Ancient Russian was a herald, an announcer of the will of a knyaz, sometimes kniaz's, deputy in police or diplomatic affairs, or tax collector. A biritch travelled to settlements, played bugle or horn in the centre of a town square or yard to gather people and read the announcement. It is precisely this, the announcement of trumps, that puts bridge apart from whist and all the other games of the same family.

Biritch is mentioned in East Slavic manuscripts since the 10th century and until the end of the 17th century. The Laurentian Codex mentions under the year of 992 that knyaz Vladimir of Kiev, when looking for a volunteer to fight a Pecheneg baghatur have sent a biritch to the regiments. Later tsars of Muscovy announced various ukases via biritches. Heads of the Church also used biritches to announce their decrees. A biritch was supposed to make an announcement in market place, not once but many times, sometimes during several months. Later other administrators (named stniks, voyevodas, etc.) had biritches in their staff, as mentioned in payrolls.

This explanation appears to supersede various explanations of the word bridge like the phrase "I bridge it" or the Galata Bridge which the players crossed to a coffeehouse to play bridge. The fact that the game was christened 'Russian Whist' gave weight to the idea that it originated in Russia. It does bear a close resemblance to Vint, and Vint is certainly of Russian origin.

Thierry Depaulis, elaborated on the Levant link of this game, with the following history: "The main evidence comes from a small booklet called 'Biritch or Russian Whist', written by one John Collinson and printed in London in 1886. A research showed that this man had been to Turkey in 1880-84 and where he learned the game in Constantinople."

"The only extant copy of this document is in the Bodleian Library at Oxford University. No author's name is visible on the document itself, but it is attributed in the library's catalogue to J. Collinson. The library's date stamp reads 23 OCT 86 (meaning 1886). It is actually a miniature bound book, containing 56 pages (28 sheets) of paper of which most are blank, about 8 cm by 13 cm between fairly hard covers. The covers are plain brown with no writing visible; the spine is covered with the library's tape (on which they have written the title, a catalogue number, and the date 1886)."

In a letter to The Saturday Review dated 28 May 1906, Collinson wrote: "Between 1880-4 I spent a considerable time in Constantinople and Asia Minor, where I played what was then called 'Biritch or Russian Whist'. I was then living, while in England, at Cromwell Road and introduced the game to many of my English friends, who liked it so much that they asked me to have the rules printed. ... 'Biritch' was attributed to the Russian colony at Constantinople; in my time the dominating social and political element." According to the registration at the Stationers' Hall (whose documents are now kept at the Public Record Office) the booklet containing the promised rules was published on 9th July 1886.

The transcription below, made by Mark Brader, is from the copy in the Bodleian Library. Spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and italics are reproduced verbatim. Headings in the original are centered, and below the main title in the original is a decorative line of Maltese crosses. Some tables are reproduced as monospaced text in order to protect the alignment. Ditto marks in the tables in the original take a form resembling a double comma, or a closing double quote moved down to the baseline, and hence are shown as double commas here.

The early description of bridge (Biritch or Russian Whist) is given on the next page.

BIRITCH, OR RUSSIAN WHIST.

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VALUE OF THE CARDS

The value of the cards is the same as at short whist.

Tricks are taken in the same manner, and the odd tricks, over and above six, are counted as at short whist.

METHOD OF PLAYING.

There are four players as at short whist, the cutting for partners, shuffling and dealing is the same, except that no card is turned up for trumps.

The dealer, after the cards have been looked at, has the option of declaring the suit he elects for trumps, or of saying "pass," in which latter case his partner must declare a suit for trumps.

In either case of the dealer or his partner declaring, the one declaring may, instead of declaring trumps, say "biritch," which means that the hands shall be played without trumps.

After the declaration of trumps, or "biritch," either of the adversaries may say "contre," in which case the value of all tricks taken is doubled, the dealer or his partner may however thereupon say "sur contre," in which latter case the value of all the tricks taken is quadrupled, and so on ad infinitum the doubling of the last established value may go on until one side ceases to call a "sur" to the previous "sur contreing."

When the declaration has been made, and the "contreing" and "sur contreing" (if any) have ceased, the person to the left of the dealer leads a card.

Then the partner of the dealer exposes all his cards, on the table, which are played by the dealer as at Dummy Whist.

No suggestions as to play may be made by the one standing out (Dummy) to the dealer.

A revoke counts the same as at Short Whist, but the exposed hand cannot revoke.

A misdeal does not change the deal, but in such cases the cards must be re-shuffled, re-cut, and re-dealt.

After each rubber there is a fresh cut for partners.

GAMES AND RUBBERS.

A game is won by the first side which scores in play 30 points. The honours do not score towards the game.

The Rubber consists, as at Short Whist, of two games out of three.

SCORING.

The odd tricks count as follows:--

If "Biritch" is declared each 10 points.

„ "Hearts" are made trumps	8	„
„ "Diamonds" „ „	6	„
„ "Clubs" „ „	4	„
„ "Spades" „ „	2	„

If all the tricks are taken by one side they add 40 extra points. This is called "Grand Slamm."

If all the tricks but one are taken by one side they add 20 extra points. This is called "Petit Slamm."

The winners of each rubber add 40 points to their score. This is called "Consolation."

There are four honours if "Biritch" is declared, which are the four aces.

Equality in aces counts nothing.

3 aces = 3 tricks.

4 „ = 4 „

4 „ in one hand . = 8 „

There are five honours, viz:--Ace, King, Queen, Knave and Ten, if trumps are declared.

Simple honours (3) . = 2 tricks.

4 „ = 4 „

4 „ (in one hand) = 8 „

5 „ = 1 trick
additional to the score for four honours.

The honour points are of equal value to the other points, except that they do not affect the games or rubbers, and are not doubled by a "contre."

If one hand has no trumps (trumps having been declared) his side, in the case of it scoring honours, adds the value of simple honours to its honour score, or, in the case of the other side scoring honours, the value of simple honours is deducted from the latter's score. This is called "Chicane."

Use of French terms in the historic pamphlet Biritich, or Russian Whist dated 1886 and the existing French expressions in the official bridge language in countries like the Netherlands and Germany are indications of the initial influence and contribution of the French to translation of the Russian terminology and maybe to the development of the game. It also confirms that bridge was played in France earlier than in other European countries, or in those diplomatic circles where French was the prevailing language. It tallies with the averment of Edouard Graziani.

(By the way, as stated further on in this writing, Harold Vanderbilt, in his own written words, recognised the earlier development of bridge in France when in 1925 he incorporated the best features of *plafond*, the French version, into the rules of his new form of the game.)

The dating of the game earlier than in England and the probability that it was of Turkish or Russian origin is strongly supported by evidence uncovered in 1974-1975 by Robert H True, who quotes from a 1904 issue of *Notes and Queries*, a letter from A M Keiley that he was a member of the Khedival Club in Cairo in 1886 and bridge was the principal card game played there and members told him it had been long so.

The idea that bridge developed from the British whist is a false trail because there are so many big differences in the laws and the fact that Biritich was played at least since 1854, (1851 in South Africa) unknown in England at the time and thus could not have developed from whist. The route undoubtedly led from the Crimea to Cairo and France and then to the rest of Europe and Britain and from there to America. That is if the offshoot to South Africa is ignored. Apparently bridge did not catch on to the British soldiers as much as to the French soldiers who spread it to Europe. This does not nullify the reference made by dr James Paget in 1843. The game could have reached a few physicians earlier within the enclosure of a hospital but did not become widely known.

If dr Paget played bridge in 1843, then only a few highly educated people would have known the game. It is well-known that initially only the elite played bridge. One of his colleagues might have brought it from the East for some of them travelled those parts of the world. The circumstances are unknown.

Noting the time-lapse between 1843 (dr Paget), 1851 when bridge was mentioned in South Africa, 1854-1856 (in the Crimea), early 1860's (in South-Eastern Europe), 1873 (in Constantinople), 1878 (Russian-Turkish War), 1886 (copyright by John Collinson) and 1892 (played first time in England), bridge could not have originated in England but only arrived there later.

Lord Brougham learned bridge in Cairo (or France) and in 1894 he dealt the cards for a game of whist in the Portland Club in London. He forgot to turn over the last card and then apologised saying that he thought they play bridge. The other members showed interest and tried this new game and it became popular. After a few months bridge was played by more players than whist.

Warning voices were heard and the famous Cavendish, great master in whist, found bridge ridiculous and boring. He refused to go to the Portland Club and stated: "It is unpleasant to see the whist temple desecrated like this." After a time-lapse he regretted and announced: "There is no single card game in the world where expertise, good judgement and insight in the intentions of the opposition are more awarding than in bridge."

This initial little tirade from Cavendish and the introduction of bridge by Lord Brougham confirmed that bridge was a game in own right and not a development from whist. Now we get to a different angle of the history of bridge.

The auction in bridge was first introduced in 1903 or 1904, but the precise circumstances are unsure. Although the precise circumstances are uncertain there is a possible explanation. This form of bridge was adjusted apparently before or during the second Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902 when somebody suggested that it is a partnership game. To be able to decide which suit would be best to call trumps, both partners should contribute and not only one to announce the trump suit. The development became a discussion between the two partners, each one emphasizing the significance of his trumps and that led to auction bridge. But the opposition also wanted a chance to announce their best suits. Auction bridge became a household game in South Africa even up to now. Many home players still keep to the tradition of auction bridge.

Consequently, other than the pamphlet "Biritch, or Russian Whist" by John Collinson, the suits were ranked spades as the highest, then hearts, diamonds and clubs, and biritch (no trump) surpassed them all. The scoring table also differed being 10 points for no trump, 9 for spades, 8 for hearts, 7 for diamonds, 6 for clubs, and an opening bid of three clubs counted 10 points for the courage to bid so high.

According to the assertion about the path of bridge in South Africa it could well be that the English soldiers took the feature of auction and the new ranking at the end of the Anglo-Boer War, 1902 from South Africa to England and to India where they were stationed in both countries. Was that the common cause for further development? At least, it would not be out of line. So far nobody explained or gave account of the change in ranking and scoring other than the aforementioned. The English soldiers could well have been the bearers from the same source to England and India at the same point of time, a rare coincidence if possible if it was developed independently. If the above account is true it also explains why the Afrikaans bridge terminology was not influenced by the French language like Netherlands and German. The path of bridge came direct from Russia to South Africa and not via France or Europe.

Apparently the development in bridge was introduced in India and England at more or less the same point of time. Was there some kind of connection, a common cause? The 1899-1902 Anglo-Boer War? The first official code of laws governing the play was set forth in 1908, the product of Bath Club and Portland Club. The first code of laws could well be influenced by the development taken from South Africa by English military officers and accepted in England. Later Portland Club registered copyright of the laws for bridge which was recently taken over by the World Bridge Federation and the laws are revised about every ten years with minor changes in conjunction with the Portland Club, the European Bridge League and the American Contract Bridge league.

Could it be that bridge superseded whist, not by being a development from whist but by replacing it because whist-players found bridge more interesting and challenging? The most probable course of the history of the development of the game suggests just that.

That the game was named Bridge after the Galata Bridge, a bridge that spans the Golden Horn and links the old and new parts of Istanbul, where British soldiers crossed the river each day to go to the coffee house and play, sounds like a nice easy explanation but does not explain how it took another nearly forty years for it to reach Great Britain, and then only via France. Also, the name of the coffee house or a name associated with coffee or leisure would certainly have been more appropriate. But this game must have had an earlier name (biritch), so why would it be changed other than translated or transformed?

Principal innovations from whist that distinguished bridge in earlier years were:

No card was turned up for trumps.

The dealer elected the trump suit or no trump.

No trump was an option in bridge.

Double and redouble were included.

The person to the left of the dealer led the first card.

The partner of the dealer (dummy) exposed all his cards.

The game was sound and formal. A player would not lead a card before asking: "Partner, may I lead?" And the partner would reply: "Please go ahead." Maybe this influenced the present bridge law that states that, after a bid has been followed by three passes, the defender on presumed declarer's left makes the opening lead face down. His partner would indicate yes, he may turn over the card, normally by nodding his head. Among other things to prevent a player to lead out of turn.

The next major change has been developed in France, where Pierre Bellanger was the first person to mention contract bridge in his 1914 edition of *Legislation du Bridge aux Encheres*, mentioning Bridge avec Contrat, and introduced at the Automobile Club de France in 1914. This was the starting point for Contract Bridge (Rubber Bridge as it was later known to distinguish it from the later Duplicate Contract Bridge).

Round about the same time on July 15, 1914, Sir Hugh Clayton published the contract principle in *The Times of India*. However, it was in France that the game of Plafond developed from the contract idea and was played in 1918 or earlier. Plafond means ceiling; only tricks bid and made counted toward game.

The development of contract bridge is well-known since 1925. According to his own written rendering an American, Harold Vanderbilt, did frame the laws of contract bridge in the autumn of 1925. He incorporated the best features of auction bridge and plafond, but also added a number of new features such as premiums for slams, vulnerability and the decimal system of scoring.

He and three friends were voyaging on board the steamship Finland from Los Angeles to Havana via the Panama Canal and tested his new ideas in practice. When it apparently was successful, he put the laws of contract bridge in writing on the boat on 1 November 1925 and gave typed copies to several of his bridge friends without the idea that it will bring about a total revolution in the way of scoring worldwide. Francis Bacon III, in 1975 the only surviving member of the foursome on the Finland, confirmed Vanderbilt's written version of what happened.

This new development was received favourably everywhere and clubs, especially in the USA, accommodated the new rules since 1927. The first international laws for contract bridge (rubber bridge) did become operative on 1 November 1932 after thorough investigation. The foundation was excellent with the result that thereafter the laws were revised on average only about every 10 years with only minor changes.

First compiled in 2002 by Voerpunt Bridge Academy, South Africa.