

# BRIDGE AND THE VICTORIANS

Nick Smith



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## **Introduction: The Great Exhibition of 1851**



The Great Exhibition of 1851 was, according to the history books, the highwater mark of British industry, culture and sport, a chance to show off to the world all the elements of the country's presumed greatness. The project was conceived by Queen Victoria's consort, Prince Albert, and held in the magnificent purpose-built Crystal Palace (the so-called Great

Shalimar), an enormous glass house in Hyde Park in the heart of London. Queen Victoria was a regular visitor, as were most of the other notable figures of the day, including Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Michael Faraday, Lewis Carroll and Alfred Lord Tennyson.

The Exhibition ran for five and a half months, from May to October 1851, and attracted six million visitors, paying upwards of five shillings per day to see exhibits of every kind, including the Koh-i-Noor, the world's largest diamond, presented to Queen Victoria after the British East India Company's annexation of the Punjab in 1849.

Although its focus was industry, the Great Exhibition also initiated various sporting events, including the America's Cup, still the world's greatest yachting race. Naturally, there was a desire to include more 'intellectual' sports like bridge and chess but space was limited and in the end there was room for just one of those great mind-sports in which Britain considered itself a world leader. Prince Albert argued for chess but his view was trumped, as it were, by Queen Victoria's preference for the queen of all card games, bridge.

The chess world was left to host the very first international tournament a mile or two away from the Crystal Palace, and staged what it claimed was an "immortal" game between two of the greatest players of the day, Adolf Anderssen and Lionel Kieseritzky. But bridge took centre stage at the Exhibition itself on the weekend of ninth-tenth August 1851,

with audiences of thousands watching spellbound as some of the world's best players, all of them British, competed for a trophy donated by John Tollemache, one of Britain's wealthiest landowners and a bridge *aficionado*. Tollemache's generosity in presenting a huge silver trophy, as well as various hugely valuable individual prizes, so impressed the queen that he was made Baron Tollemache a little later in his long life.

It was the Queen herself who designed the format of the tournament. It was to feature four teams, each drawn from different corners of her realm, perhaps to prove which was the strongest. There would be two 16-board semi-finals on Saturday ninth and the two winning teams would return the following day for a 16-board final. The four chosen teams represented Yorkshire, Wessex, London and the Home Counties, each being required to field two mixed partnerships. Most of the great bridge players of the day were female so the obligation to include a man in every partnership was a little contentious but perhaps added to the drama of the occasion.

The tournament achieved legendary status – its own immortality, indeed – but it is only recently that the hand records have re-surfaced amongst a bunch of private papers found in Kensington Palace. Only now is it possible to re-imagine the events of August 1851 and the extraordinary deals that were viewed by the Queen and so many loyal subjects. There can be little doubt that the brilliance on display over those 32 deals was like nothing seen before or since. The bidding was, perhaps, a little crude by modern standards, but the cardplay, despite the odd mistake and misjudgment, was quite remarkable.

The culture of the game was a little different in those days. Today there are strict time limits for tournament players and there is rarely time for comment on a deal, but back in the 1850s, bridge players were positively encouraged to express their views and display their personalities. The post-mortems are surprisingly frank by modern standards but they are also a large part of what attracted such large numbers of kibitzers who themselves felt encouraged to offer their views on what had occurred. This is your chance to savour every card played and every biting comment from this feast of bridge.

The Great Exhibition Catalogue included brief pieces by the team captains, introducing their respective sides. These are reproduced below.



**London – team captain, Charles Dickens**

London is a city shrouded in impenetrable fog, through which the mighty Thames wends its inscrutable way. Obscene wealth sits cheek by jowl with abject poverty but bridge is played by rich and poor alike, sometimes for high stakes but often for just a farthing or two or the pleasure of competition. Young players are drawn, as if by magnets, from nearby towns and counties to play in the great bridge clubs of Pall Mall and Acol. Our team features some of the most talented incomers.

One of our pairs, Pip Pirrip and Estella Havisham, first played cards together some twenty years ago as children, when Pip was invited to Estella's family home, Satis House, close to the coastal marshes of Kent, to play Hearts, a fiendishly simple card game. The two youngsters graduated to whist and bridge, forming an on-off partnership which has triumphed in many of the world's top bridge tournaments. Pip's flamboyant brilliance is complemented by Estella's cold, analytical skill and her inscrutable 'poker' face.

London's other, relatively inexperienced, pair are David Copperfield, a young man after my own heart, and Dora Spenlow. Copperfield's memoir, which has reached a large audience in serial form in the last year or so, tells the dramatic tale of his bridge career, including his partnership with Dora, herself a brilliant player despite struggles with ill-health and a surprising lack of confidence in her own abilities.

As the home team and blessed with some of the world's finest players, London surely start favourites to collect the Tollemache Cup.



### **Wessex – team captain, Thomas Hardy**

My team understands that success is but a slippery stepping-stone on the way to ultimate failure and tragedy, but will fight till the bitter end. The Wessex players have all developed their skills at the Caster Bridge Club – it's a long and dusty road from there to the Great Shalimar but I hope they will arrive refreshed and ready to give of their best.

Each has their own remarkable story to tell. Bathsheba Everdene has triumphed in the male-dominated world of farming and does not suffer fools gladly. Partnerships with Gabriel Oak and William Boldwood yielded sporadic success but she has really made her mark with her current partner, Sgt. Francis 'Frank' Troy, known for his flashy and brilliant play, as well as for the military uniform he wears to all bridge games, including his regimental sword. Miss Everdene may have trouble keeping this maverick genius in check.

Our other pair are said to have met at Talbothays Farm in the Vale of the Great Dairies. Tess Durbeyfield may have humble origins as a dairy-maid but her card-reading is often inspired. Her partner, Angel Clare is, by his own account, a perpetual student, but a bridge player hugely confident in his own abilities. The Great Exhibition is lucky to see their talents on display because the bridge tournament clashes with their wedding day! Win or lose on the Saturday, they will tie the knot on Sunday morning at St Mildred's Church in the City. If necessary, the newly-weds will postpone their honeymoon to play in the final on Sunday afternoon.

In case the wedding overruns, we also have Alec d'Urberville ready to fill in at a moment's notice. A former partner (and, it's said, a distant relative) of Miss Durbeyfield, Alec tells anyone who will listen that he is "the best player in the world". His rivals refer to him as Smart Alec but my own estimation is that he does not have a quarter of Tess's worth.





**Yorkshire – joint  
captains, Ellis &  
Carrer Bell (they,  
them)**



We know that many of  
the visitors to the Great

Exhibition will not have heard of Yorkshire and that those who *have* tend to think of it as a county of perpetual drizzle and grinding poverty. But the fact that it is always raining has led to the growth in popularity of such indoor sports as bridge. Our players are passionate and committed, determined to show their Yorkshire spirit to a hostile and unforgiving world.

One of our star players is Jane Eyre, a schoolteacher from Lowood before she determined to make some sort of living from bridge. We have invited not one but two partners for Miss Eyre. For the semi-final, she will be playing with St John Rivers who spends much of his time abroad as a missionary, teaching bridge in far-flung corners of the British Empire. As chance would have it, his boat sails for East Africa on Sunday morning so, if Yorkshire make the final, his place will be taken by Edward Rochester of Thornfield Hall, recovering from recent eye surgery but still a remarkable player.

At the other table, we have a pair who have been playing together since their teenage years. Legend has it that out on the wily, windy moors they'd roll and fall in green but it is possible that they were passing the time fine-tuning the relay sequences in their Spanish Diamond system. One is the saturnine, brooding figure of Heathcliff – no one knows whether that is his first name or his surname and no one dares ask. He is a man of few words and he is rarely seen away from his isolated home at the top of the moors, Wuthering Heights. The other is Catherine Earnshaw, a mercurial and brilliant competitor, long absent from the Yorkshire bridge scene but recently back near her best, at least in spirit. For Cathy, bridge is not a matter of life or death; it's much more serious than that.



### **The Home Counties – captain, Jane Austen\***

It is a truth, universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a bridge partner. And some of the very best bridge partners are to be found in the Home Counties, happy to lend their skills to the wealthiest of patrons. One of our stars, Elizabeth Bennet, for instance, has earned a good living as the professional partner of multi-millionaire, Fitzwilliam Darcy, but, for this event, she has paired off with George Wickham, a relatively impoverished officer in the militia. Wickham's erratic play and general unreliability drive her to distraction but he has to put up with a lot too, regularly humiliated as he is in the post-mortem.

Our other partnership is a little more settled. Anne Elliot and Frederick Wentworth first played together in England's Junior International team before Wentworth left to pursue a career in the navy, but they seem to have picked up where they left off, to judge from recent results. Miss Elliot is a quiet but effective tactician while Captain Wentworth, as he must now be called, shows great flair to justify his over-optimistic bidding style.

In truth, we had an embarrassment of riches to choose from. Amongst the strong pairs to have missed out, we might have picked Woodhouse/Knightley, Dashwood/Ferrars, Morland/Tilney or Price/Bertram, all high in the national rankings. But I'm sure the selected foursome will do the Home Counties proud.

\* sadly deceased, by the time the Great Exhibition opened in May 1851



## Declarer Play Quiz

When you overbid, you need to play well! On each of these deals, you may assume that the cards lie pretty well (in line with any bids that have been made) and that the contract is indeed makeable. Leads are fourth/second and 'standard', as are signals. Assume the defenders are good, logical players and will not make any unforced errors (unless stated).

### Semi-Final Board 02– Strict Liability

N/S Vul	♠AQ53	<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
Dealer: E	♥K6			2♦	Pass
	♦A754	2♥	Dble	Pass	3♣
	♣J64	Pass	3♦	Pass	3♥
	N	Pass	4♥	Dble	Rdble
	W	All Pass			
	E				
	S				
	♠742	2♦ = Standard Multi	3♦ = transfer?		
	♥AQ103	Rdble = rescue?			
	♦Q	Lead: ♠4 (fourth, second)			
	♣A9872	How will you try to make 4♥XX?			

See p.28 to discover how Sgt. Troy made the contract.

## Semi-Final Board 01 – A Lightner Start

Queen Victoria and Prince Albert settled down to kibitz at the home table of the London team on either side of South who, they knew from experience, was by far the most likely to be declarer on each deal. These were not so much the pound seats as the hundred guinea thrones, each one encrusted with diamonds and sapphires looted from Indian palaces. A motley assemblage of other dignitaries and NPCs filled the other kibitzing chairs.

Neither Vul	♠AK765		
Dealer: N	♥87432		
	♦42		
	♣9		
♠J108	N		♠Q9432
♥—	W	E	♥AK5
♦AKJ93		S	♦105
♣KJ852			♣A103
			♠—
			♥QJ1096
			♦Q876
			♣Q764

West	North	East	South
Tess	Estella	Angel	Pip
	2♦	Pass	2♥
Dble	All Pass		

Board 1 gave London the start it had dreamed of. The icy beauty, Estella (N), dealer at love all, opened 2♦, promising at least nine cards in the majors and a weak hand.

Wessex's Angel Clare, a scholarly young man, passed, with evident reluctance, and Pip Pirrip, the blacksmith's boy who had moved to London from Kent's coastal marshes, considered his options with the South cards. It was clear his side had a good heart fit but his hand was weak and had plenty of defensive

potential should opponents reach a minor-suit contract. He settled for a quiet 2♥ response.

With hindsight, Tess Durbeyfield (W) might have essayed a 3♦ overcall but, anxious to get both of her minor suits into the auction, the pretty milkmaid opted for a take-out double. Estella passed and Angel

stared at his handsome 13-count. He had game-going values but he could hardly leap to 4♠ when this was one of North's suits. 3NT might well be making but surely there was a good chance of collecting 500 or even 800 from 2♥ doubled? Partner would lead a trump and he would soon be able to play three rounds of those and wait for plenty of tricks in the side suits later on. Yes, that would establish who was 'boss' right from the off!

But Tess did not have a trump to lead. Instead, she placed the ♦A on the table. Partner's five on this trick did not look particularly encouraging so, rather than set up the queen, Tess switched to the ♣5. Angel beamed encouragingly as he took his ace and plonked one of his high trumps on the table. Pip, anxious to retain a possible entry to dummy, played the ♥Q on this trick while Tess discarded a low diamond.

"No trumps, darling?" Angel enquired.

"Sorry, Angel," she whispered. "I might have led one if I'd had one..."

"Yes, yes, of course ... I have no doubt!"

Angel could see no alternative but to continue with his other top trump (on which Pip again played high and Tess discarded a club) and then the ♥5 to prevent eight tricks being available on a cross-ruff. Pip followed to the third round with his carefully-preserved ♥6 and Tess tried to find a suitable third discard. If she pitched another diamond, there was an evident risk that declarer could establish a long card in the suit. But the same was true of clubs. Could she afford a spade? It looked a little less likely to cost a trick so, with a heavy heart, she let go of the ♠8.

Pip, who had been resigned to drifting one off, was quick to spot his chance. He overtook the ♥6 with dummy's ♥7 and cashed dummy's top two spades, bringing down the ♠10 and ♠J on his left. Dummy's ♠765 were just good enough now for ruffing finesses against Angel's ♠Q94 and there was no difficulty in returning to table with club ruffs. One of his remaining minor-suit losers could be discarded on the established ♠5 and that was eight tricks in the bag. The defence was welcome to the thirteenth trick.

"Not bad on a combined 14-count!" Pip smiled, scoring up +470. "But I don't think there was a defence to beat 2♥."

“Maybe I should have kept all my spades?” Tess wondered aloud. “I thought of discarding a club instead.”

“I have just enough entries,” Pip insisted. “On that discard, I can win the third trump in hand with the six, ruff a club, cash the ♠AK, back to hand with a spade ruff, club ruff, spade ruff with my last trump, and the ♣Q is now a winner. It’s bad luck for you that your partner can only reduce the impending cross-ruff at the expense of a suicide seesaw squeeze.”

“A suicide seesaw squeeze?” exclaimed the Queen at his shoulder. “It’s a splendidly alliterative term, but what on earth does it *mean*?”

“I can explain...” Pip started, conscious that this might take some time.

“But can we make game our way?” Angel came to Pip’s rescue. “Let’s hope not ...”

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>	This was the auction
David C.	Bathsheba	Dora	Troy	at the other table in the London-Wessex semi-final.
	Pass	1♠	Dble	Dora Spenlow (E) was
Rdble	4♥	Dble	Pass	not a player universally
5♥	Pass	5♠	Pass	loved in the bridge world,
Pass	Dble	All Pass		partly because she had a special medical

dispensation to play with a dog on her lap. Jip was an excitable Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, inclined to yap at inconvenient moments. Indeed, some thought Jip was trained to send messages to Dora’s partner. Jip had big blue eyes and a mass of brown fur where his ears should be; Dora, much the same, her ears covered by blonde ringlets with which she fidgeted incessantly. Trying hard to shush her dog, Dora opened 1♠, second in hand.

Sgt. Troy of the Wessex Militia appeared to have dressed for the occasion. But the truth was that he *always* wore his full military regalia – scarlet tunic, tricorn, ceremonial sword, the lot. His bidding style was every bit as swashbuckling as his outfit, so it was no surprise when he found a take-out double of 1♠ on a queen-high 7-count opposite a passed hand. This left Dora’s fiancé, David Copperfield, a little short of a convenient bid. 3♦ was a possibility but Dora was known to pass even the most 110%-

## THE GREATEST BRIDGE MATCH EVER PLAYED?

Great Britain has given the world many great games — football, cricket, tennis, golf, shove ha’penny, etc — and the world has repaid them by playing them better than the Britons and winning all the shiny baubles ever since. The same is true with bridge but there was a time, in the mid-nineteenth century, when English bridge players, especially women, were the finest in the world. The Great Exhibition of 1851 (in London’s Hyde Park) hosted a tournament that featured dazzling cardplay on almost every board and brilliance not seen before or since. Here, for the first time, you have the chance to enjoy those deals.

Nick Smith’s books are famous for including the toughest single-dummy problems in the history of bridge. If you solve even a couple of these, you are a future international player.



**NICK SMITH** is a Grand Master and international player from Oxford, representing England in the Teltscher Trophy this year (2024). He is the author of numerous Master Point Press books, including *Bridge Literature* (1993), *Bridge and the Romantics* (2019), *More Bridge Literature* (2020), *Sublime Declarer Play* (2023) and the forthcoming epic, *King Arthur and the Knights of the Bridge Table*. He is also the author of numerous novels and plays.