

Jeremy Clarkson: Ties? Rubbers? Five equals 11? Learning to play bridge left me vulnerable to a large glass of red

Jeremy Clarkson



As a general rule, I'm a big fan of card games. I spent a great deal of my formative years playing blackjack because, even if you're gambling only tiny amounts, casinos give you free drinks. And since then I've whiled away many happy hours playing *Between the Sheets*, *Queen of Spades* and, best of all, *Oh Hell*.

It's hard to understand how playing cards came about. Who thought: "Right — we have invented a printing press, so let's use it to make 52 bits of paper divided into four suits"?

And then, once someone had worked out how they could be used to play a game, why did someone else develop another? And then another? And then another? No one did that with chess. They came up with the board and the bishops and the prawns and they left it at that. Today no one ever says: "What sort of chess are we playing?"

With cards, though, people did keep inventing new ways of using them until one day a soldier in the Crimean War decided that, to take his mind off the disease and how Wilfred had just been blown up again, he'd invent the most complicated game of them all: contract bridge.

I've avoided this in the past, mainly because I had better things to do and I'm not 87. But last week it was time to step into God's waiting room and take it up.

When you play blackjack you are usually surrounded by serious-looking Arabs and chain-smoking Chinese men in a room with no windows, and when you play everything else you are at someone's kitchen table surrounded by several empty wine bottles, some overflowing ashtrays and a bit of sick.

Bridge is different. It's serious. So we'd be playing it in one of those clubs in St James's where everyone is dead and you have to wear a tie. I used to have a tie. I wore it for Margaret Thatcher's funeral. But it had gone missing, so I bought another and then — this is true — I had to go on YouTube to remind myself how it should be done up.

That's another thing I don't get. Who woke up one morning and thought: "This ruff is annoying me, so instead I shall wrap a bit of silk round my neck"? I'd like to meet him so that I can kill him.

Anyway, my tie was eventually sort of tied and I had found a jacket that was nearly the same colour as my trousers and off I went.

The cards were dealt and our teacher explained that I must let my partner know where my strengths lay. "Right," I said enthusiastically. "I've got a shitload of clubs."

Apparently this was wrong. You aren't allowed to say what you've got. You must hint at it by saying you'd like the trumps to be clubs and that you've got enough to win one trick. Well, I had the ace, king, queen, jack and 10 so obviously I was going to win way more than one trick. I therefore opened with "five clubs".

Apparently this was also wrong. But it did stop anyone else bidding and that meant the game could get under way. My partner began by excusing herself from the game entirely, which was weird. She simply put her cards on the table, face up, and said: "Good luck."

"Whatever," I replied.

Yup. That was wrong too. I was supposed to have said: "Thank you, partner." Which was weird, because why should I thank her for simply giving up?

No matter. I had all the heavy-hitting trumps and I needed to win only five tricks. Nope. Wrong again. Bidding five meant that for some reason I had to win 11 tricks. I have no idea why, but I failed completely. And lost.

Or did I? Because at the end of each hand you add up the number of light fittings in the room, subtract the number of teeth in your head, put that number above the line and the number of children you have below the line and then after five rounds there's a rubber and the winner is the player nearest the mantelpiece.

Who the bloody hell thought that made sense? It's as stupid as cricket. You get one run if you do one run, four if you send the ball all the way over there, six if it gets there without bouncing . . . and if it rains it's a draw.

Mind you, it could be worse. The Germans have developed a version of bridge called skat. In that, you have to work out which one of the other two players will be your partner. Imagine that. Playing a team game when you don't know who your team will be.

Perhaps that's what's gone wrong with their national football squad. But, whatever, it won't catch on here, as no one is going to say yes if you invite them round for an evening of skat.

There's another problem with bridge, which became clear as my inaugural evening wore on. Because we were in a beautiful club in St James's where all the other customers were dead, the waiters had nothing to do but constantly fill up my wine glass with a beautiful red.

And since bridge requires you to not participate if your partner made the opening bid of the successful suit and is wearing white underwear, there's very little to do half the time but drink it.

Soon I was a bit sozzled and I was arguing with the teacher, who kept saying that to win I needed to lose. In the same way as John Prescott used to say that the slower you drive, the faster you get there. He didn't make any sense. It didn't make any sense. And what were trumps again?

You can't do this if you want to win. You must concentrate as though you are flying an airliner and all four engines have stalled. If you daydream for even a moment, you've had it.

Which is why I wouldn't use MPs and civil servants to negotiate our tricky exit from the EU. I'd use our national bridge team instead.