

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

Cues by *Andy Hunter*



When cues were first manufactured on a commercial basis, they were invariably made from just a single piece of plain ash. After the introduction of ebony at the butt—which was found to add weight and improve the balance—it didn't take long for more exotic woods to make an appearance. In England this happened in the early 1830's when Thurston's started producing cues with tulip, crocus, satinwood and even bamboo as butts. But well before this, ornate cues were being produced on the Continent. Requiring great craftsmanship to manufacture, these were made with numerous inlays and fancy splices and would be commissioned by the well-off young men about town. In addition to exotic woods, inlays could also include ivory, mother of pearl, brass, silver, gold and even precious stones. It became fashionable for members of London's more exclusive clubs to demonstrate their status in society with ever more exotic designs, which became increasingly ornate. Designs included flowers, animals and figures which all swirled around the butt. In addition to the traditional ash, the shafts of these cues will also be found in maple, pear and hornbeam. Towards the end of the 19th century, cues of this type were being manufactured in India and imported back to England.

Many of the ornate cues do not carry any maker's name, although two which do appear are identified as "Holt" and "B. Fink". The latter's name was often engraved into the ferrule or the flat of the butt.

If a collector is looking to acquire an example of an ornate cue, he would do well to seek the advice of an expert, as value can vary significantly depending upon condition, and materials used for the inlay. This type of cue was produced over a long period of time, which also makes a difference to value (£500-£1,500)

A fine example of an early ornate cue from the collection of Peter Clare.

Joseph Bennett

Joseph Bennett first won the professional champion in 1870 when he defeated John Roberts junr; taking the title again in 1880 before an



accident forced him to resign a year later. He had another try at the championship in 1885 but was easily defeated by Roberts. Shortly after this he gave up competitive play, concentrating on teaching the game and running his billiard rooms at the Oxford Club, Oxford Street. Renown for his "careful" play, he was one of only two players ever to have defeated the great John Roberts junr in a championship match, a fact he was not prepared to let anyone forget, as his adverts

continued to proclaim the fact right up to his death. This occurred in January 1905 when he was 63 years old.

Both Burroughes & Watts and Thurston's produced cues bearing Bennett's name. All of the Bennett cues I have seen have been hand-spliced. However, I have heard of a machine-spliced example from Thurston's and it is possible that Burroughes & Watts also produced some of these. Prices are based on the hand-spliced model (as with most types of cue, machine-spliced examples would be approximately 25% of the same hand-spliced.)

Burroughes & Watts

- 1) Made with a plain ebony butt and a maple or cherry veneer. The name "J. Bennett" is stamped directly onto the flat with the makers name underneath. (£130-180)
- 2) The second version has a round badge inset in the butt. "J. Bennett" is printed across the centre, with "Burroughes & Watts" around the circumference, and "Trade Mark" underneath. (£200-300)

Thurston's

Both versions of the Thurston's cue carry the same badge. This has "Registered" and "Joseph Bennett" across the centre, and "Sole Makers Thurston & Co." around the circumference.

- 1) The first version has an ebony butt with a maple or cherry veneer, in the same style as the Burroughes & Watts model. (£200-300)
- 2) The second, and much rarer version, includes a silver plate above the badge. These presentation cues could well have been made for Bennett to offer as prizes for competitions played at his Oxford Street billiard rooms. The example illustrated comes from 1887—Bennett's last year on the professional circuit. (£400-500)



A Thurston's cue with a presentation plate

More helpful hints

In my first article, I mentioned the problem of gradual shortening of cues which were not ferruled, and the technique of splicing a new shaft to restore the original length. This was usually achieved in one of two ways :

- 1) With a "butterfly" splice at about the mid-point of the cue where a new top piece was added. This method was intended to be invisible and so the repair may not be immediately apparent at first glance.
- 2) The second method again involved cutting the cue at the centre, this time attaching an ebony ferrule, into which the new shaft was dowelled. This will give the appearance of a modern two-piece cue, except that the joint is permanent.

As either of these processes constitute a major repair and alteration to the original condition of the cue, the value is always significantly reduced. I have heard that cues may have been manufactured in this way during the war years, when there was a shortage of timber. However, this is difficult to establish and the simple rule is to avoid cues which have been modified in this way, unless you are particularly keen to acquire an example.

Acknowledgement

I wish to acknowledge my thanks to Peter Clare of Thurston's, Clare House, St. Anne Street, Liverpool (Tel. 0151-207-1336). Thurston's are one of the top manufacturer's of billiard equipment as well as other sports.