

The Evolution of Whist and Bridge Boxed Sets, 1870s - 1930s

by Tony Hall

For collectors of whist and bridge ephemera there are some wonderful examples of past elegance available at remarkably modest prices. Boxed sets of cards, markers, scorers and rule booklets have been around for many decades. I currently have a large number dating from the 1870s to the 1930s and beyond. Part of the fun is to use all of the clues available to identify from which point in the evolution of whist to contract bridge a particular item comes. Condition is important for collectors, but does not necessarily demonstrate age. Some of the “shop perfect” items in my collection are well over 100 years old, whereas tattier, much-used items can be of relatively recent origin. It is also important to note that packs of cards or mini-books of rules contained in the boxes may have been added by the original users, or later at the point of sale, and offer no true indication of a set’s age or source without other evidence. More often than not, the original playing cards are missing which removes one of the key identifying factors.

In what follows I have attempted to illustrate the evolutionary stages from Whist to Contract Bridge through the boxed sets sold as the process evolved. I doing so, I have modified Julian Laderman’s proposed timescales¹ by the addition of a specific period for Royal Auction Bridge. I recognize, as he does, that they are only a rough guide. Whist had been played for some hundreds of years before the first attempt at introducing a form of pre-play bidding. Thereafter there was:

Bridge or Bridge-whist	1897 – 1910
Auction Bridge	1908 – 1930
Royal Auction Bridge	1914 - 1930
Contract Bridge	from 1927

In practice, of course, some people will have continued to play whist throughout these years, ignoring the new developments; some adherents to auction bridge will have played long after the Laws for Contract Bridge were published, and so on. The manufacturers of card playing materials were well aware of this and some of the transitional periods are evident from the boxes, rule books and score pads which they produced.

Whist

Probably my earliest whist box set dates from the middle of the 19th Century. It is essentially Victorian in style with its black lacquered wood exterior, ornate brass inlays and delicate, removable mahogany tray. I surmise that the box is pre-1970 because the tray is designed for coin-shaped counters rather than the whist markers with pop-up pegs which became popular in the last quarter of the century (see below).

¹ Julian Laderman, *Bumblepuppy Days*, Masterpoint Press, 2014



Here are six further whist box sets produced between 1870 and 1900, identified as such by their inscriptions and contents. The first is “The Windsor” whist box by Charles Goodall & Son. Described in the catalogue as covered in red “Moroccan Leather” and with a silk lining, the complete set would have included two packs of cards as well as the two hard wood and ivory Camden Whist Markers². No detective work is needed here as both details are inscribed in gold lettering on the drop-down front flap. (Otherwise the font on the lid is easily recognised as Goodall as it was also used on their contemporary Bezique and Patience sets.)



The next set is equally clearly a Chas. Goodall & Son product. It is labelled “Whist” on the top of the box, and carries the maker’s name and “The Sandringham Whist Cabinet” inside the lid, together with a list of contents. It is designed to carry two packs of Mogul cards, a

² The more up-market sets in leather would have contained the higher spec hard wood and ivory “Camden” markers, whereas contemporary cardboard sets with cards would have contained the all wood “Pall Mall” version. Both types of marker were also sold in pairs without cards in cardboard boxes.

rule book and two of the more advanced and increasingly popular “Foster Whist Markers” on sale from the 1890s³.



Sadly, in my set, the two packs of Mogul cards are missing (as they almost always are) from underneath the moveable tray, as is the book of rules, but the two Foster Whist Markers are intact. Had the original rule book been enclosed it would have looked like this and been dated somewhere in the 1890s. This copy, by Captain Crawley⁴, is dated 1899 and was contained in the following set again from Goodall & Son. This box is covered in what the Goodall catalogue describes as “imitation long-grained leather” in black, with a red silk lining, a lid-strap to hold the rule booklet in place and two diminutive Tom Thumb Markers resting on two packs of medium-sized cards.



The relative size of this box can be seen from the Tom Thumb markers measuring 5½ x 3 cm compared with the standard Camden Marker size of 9¼ x 5¼ cm.

The origin of the next box is more difficult to determine. It is a leatherette-covered wooden box with a lacquered fan of playing cards on top. It does not look like a typical Goodall &

³ See: Tony Hall, “Whist & Gaming Counters and Markers”, The World of Playing Cards, June 2015

⁴ See: Tony Hall, The Personalities and Books which shaped the game of Whist, 1860-1900, The World of Playing Cards, October 2018

Son product, but whoever made it designed it to contain a pair of “Camden Whist Markers” in the lid which were produced from 1870 onwards. No other whist markers in my extensive collection fit the spaces available, so I believe this was how the set was sold, obviously also with cards and rule book. But who made it and precisely when remains a mystery.



Next, amongst the 19th Century Whist sets is a wooden box with a stainless steel button catch. It is not attributed to a particular maker but both the cards (Piatnik) and the two whist markers are marked “Made in Austria” so I see no reason to suggest that the set is anything but a genuine Austrian import. By the later years of the nineteenth century a wide variety of manufacturers worldwide were copying the Goodall design of marker, with or without the permission of the designer.



I conclude my brief review of Whist sets with an example which is very easy to date and identify. This tan leather case with its silk lining containing cards and unmarked whist markers has two evident identifiers. First, it carries the retailer’s insignia, H. B. Drew & Co., 42 King’s Road, Brighton in silver lettering inside the lid. This was a London company which opened a branch in Brighton in 1894.



The clincher, however, is the silver mark on the tiny clasp which dates the piece as made in London in 1896. If only it was this easy to date some other items. Both packs of playing cards, and advertising material contained in the box, are from De La Rue and are undoubtedly original to the box as sold.

Bridge-Whist 1897 - 1910

In the last years of the 19th Century the game moved on with the introduction of a form of pre-play bidding, albeit a very basic one, and the new game became very popular. "Bridge" (sometimes called Bridge-Whist) was played under rules set by the Portland Club, London, in 1895 and the Whist Club of New York in 1897. The only set in my collection about which I am absolutely sure that it was produced for Bridge-Whist is this one, produced sometime around 1908 -10.



This set is in pristine condition and has barely, if ever, been used. Hence my earlier comment that the state of repair of a particular box is not necessarily an indication of its

age. The contents of this box are obviously original including the 16th edition⁵ of a leather-bound book "Bridge" by Professor Hoffman dated 1908 which describes bridge as "*a new development of Whist, which having been a few years ago introduced at some of the London Clubs, has since found its way into much wider circles, and appears to have firmly established itself in public favour*". The booklet advertises a range of Bridge "cabinets" from Goodall's "*complete with Cards, Scoring Blocks and Rules, handsomely finished, in a variety of choice leathers*". The booklet, and the black leather-backed, and delightfully named, "ACME Bridge tablet"⁶ score sheets both indicate the points scoring system established for "Bridge-Whist". The set also includes two copies of a folded paper insert offering "Bridge Hints presented by Chas. Goodall, & son, Ltd.". The two packs of Goodall Cards were those used between 1897 and 1925.

I am torn about the date of my next example. This splendid heavy metal box is lined in purple velvet and contains two elaborately designed removable metal containers for the two packs of cards (not original) together with a lid recess for a book of rules. The box was originally completely silver-plated but the top has suffered the rigours of over-cleaning to reveal the copper underneath.



The design screams late Victorian and the term Bridge on the lid suggests it was produced around 1900. However, this type of "blue bird/bamboo" design was popular both around the turn of the century and again in the 1920s, but, given the overall style of the set, I suspect it is from the turn of the century rather than later.

⁵ This is the 16th edition, "revised and enlarged" of a booklet which can only be some 10 years at most since its first edition, and thus indicates just how popular this modification to the game of Whist had become.

⁶ However, the Hoffman book advertises an even more elaborate scoring pad called "The Climax"! One can only wonder what additional feature could justify such a title!

Auction Bridge 1908 - 1930

The Bridge-Whist rules and scoring arrangements were very basic so it was not long before those overseeing the game sought improvements. The Portland Club approved the first set of rules for Auction Bridge in 1909 and as early as 1914 the Club approved its first set of rules for the next variation – Royal Auction Bridge. This left the producers of game materials working in a rapidly changing marketplace. New sets, therefore, had to cater for the different versions of the game played by their customers.

I have only one box, maker unknown, that is identified solely with Auction Bridge which suggests a production date of 1909 – 1914. It might have been produced later but by that time most producers covered themselves by using the generic term Bridge or the more widespread new variation, Royal Auction Bridge.



Royal Auction Bridge 1914 - 1930

This next glorious, leather-covered set is beautifully adorned with an Oriental bird and tree motif in gold and other extravagant indented patterns.



It contains the original red leather-backed scoring pads carrying the scoring systems for all three variants of the game at this stage; for Bridge (Bridge Whist), Auction Bridge and Royal Auction Bridge placing it firmly at this point in the evolution of the game i.e. sometime between 1914 and the late 1920s..

I have a number of sets which are similarly designed to be flexible but are labelled "Bridge".

First, is a box in dark green leatherette which contains matching green-backed scoring pads catering for the three early versions of Bridge. All the contents of this set are produced by De La Rue as, I believe, was the box. This includes the two packs of cards, the DLR "ONTO Bridge pencils" and scoring pads together with "The Guide to Royal Auction Bridge" by Ernest Bergholt, published by Thomas De La Rue AND Chas Goodall & Son⁷ in 1930.



Second, is a brown leatherette set, also containing a copy of the Ernest Bergholt book, but dated a year earlier in 1929. The four scoring pads are designated C.G & S, contain the laws for Royal Auction Bridge alone and it seems likely that this set too was produced by De La Rue sometime after the takeover of Goodalls in 1922.



Unusually this set also contains compartments containing four glass trays, each sporting a suit insignia. I can only assume that these were personal ash-trays – one for each of the players. They are obviously too small for peanuts!

⁷ De La Rue took over Goodall & Son in 1922 and continued to use the name and designs for many years. Sometimes they quoted both names, as here; at other times just the DLR designation on a continued Goodall design.

By the mid-1920s and beyond, some companies began experimenting with different materials. This particular example, in Bakelite, was produced in England by Seaforth and the design alone screams art deco, dating it as anywhere between the mid-1920s to the end of the 1930s. There is no record of its original contents or which card company commissioned Seaforth to produce the box.



This next example – another “Bridge” designation – has a red “leather” exterior, and purple silk lining. The matching purple and gold-edged booklet contains “The Laws of Royal Auction Bridge...finally Approved and Adopted by the Committee of the Portland Club (May 1914)”. The matching score pads cater for all three of the early forms of Bridge and, along with the ONTO pencils and booklet, were produced by De La Rue. The booklet quoting the 1914 version of the Laws places this box somewhere between 1914 and the late 1920s when the Laws were revised. This particular box was retailed by Truslove & Hanson, the fashionable bookshop and stationers in Sloane Street, London.



The advertisements in the back of the Laws advertises “Royal Auction Bridge cases ... in various leathers”. and note, these boxes are now marked on the lid as for “Royal Auction Bridge”.



Other sets from this period were more confident in their designation for Royal Auction Bridge. Here are a few examples. The first is similar in design to earlier models.



This second, also unambiguously concerned with Royal Auction Bridge. It has a traditional interior layout, with rule book and space for cards and scoring pads. However, the lid insert is a folder containing a book “Auction at a Glance” produced by L.G. Sloan, the “sole representatives for Great Britain of the United States Playing Card Company”. There is no way of knowing whether this was how it was originally sold because there are no other identifiers.



The next set is similar on the outside to the last one but is unusual in that, when opened, the cards rest in the lid and not on the base. The little leather-covered booklet is an empty, lined notebook rather than a book of rules, and the two complete scoring pads are exclusively concerned with the rules and scoring arrangements for Auction Bridge alone. The text on the reverse of the scoring pads is presented by A. E. Manning Foster⁸, one of

⁸ Alfred Edge Manning-Foster was frequently described as the “Grand Old man of Bridge”. He was a prominent British Bridge player and writer. He was the founder and Editor of Bridge Magazine. He was also the founder, and until shortly before his death, the President of the British Bridge League. He did much to promote Duplicate Bridge, although personally preferred Rubber, and helped to promote Contract Bridge but was concerned about the development of conventions which threatened to make Bridge less of a game played for fun.

the foremost English writers on various forms of Bridge in the early years of the 20th Century until his death in 1939.



I have an identical set to this one in light tan which is obviously from the same (unidentified) source. However, in this second set the four sets of matching tan scoring pads are exclusively for Contract Bridge. It would appear that the first of these two boxes pre-dated the introduction and popularity of Contract Bridge, say the mid to late 1920s. The second, may have been sold as a Royal Auction box, but either the sellers or the first owners quickly added a more up-to-date set of scorers from the early 1930s onward.

Contract Bridge 1927 onwards

The Laws of Contract Bridge were first approved by the Whist Club of New York in 1927, and were essentially endorsed by the Portland Club for use in the UK and British Empire in 1929.

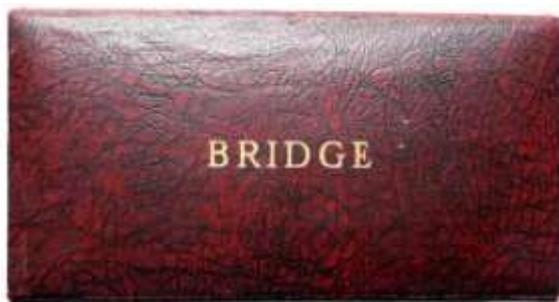
In 1931, A.E. Manning published the 9th edition of his "**Auction Bridge made Clear**" which first appeared in 1921. Even in this short book specifically about Auction Bridge, the last 60 pages are devoted to "The Laws of Contract Bridge". In introducing the Laws, he quotes a letter from the Portland Club to other London Clubs announcing that "*The Portland Club consider that there appears now to be a sufficient need for a British Code of Laws covering the variety of Auction Bridge which is known as 'Contract'*". The letter goes on to explain that "*the Portland Club are not at present attempting to formulate a new game*" and therefore "*are provisionally accepting the American scoring and are adapting the existing Laws of 'Auction' to fit the newer game of 'Contract'.*". The letter continues: "*The fact that 'Contract' is now being played at the Portland Club as an alternative game is not an indication that the Portland Club propose to adopt it in place of 'Auction', nor an expression of the view that 'Contract' will supersede 'Auction' as a Club game.*"

Given this degree of indecision on the part of the game's law-makers, it is not surprising that throughout the 1930's card producers kept their options open when producing their boxed sets.

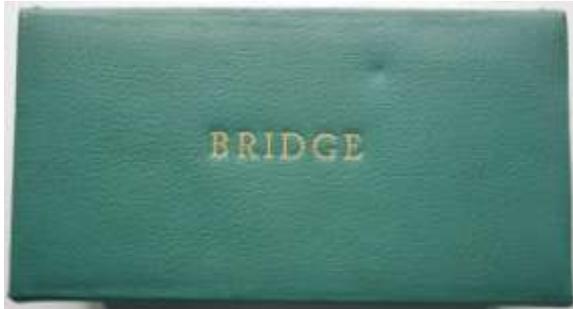
By 1933 – when the W.D. & H.O. Wills playing card promotion⁹ was launched, one of the “gifts” - the Bridge boxed set, complete with cantilevered card holders - the enclosed rule sheet had the laws for Contract Bridge on one side and for Auction Bridge on the other.



Other producers followed suit well into the 1930s while the transition to Contract Bridge was taking place. All of the last three sets featured here contained scoring blocks with the C.G. & S Ltd. initials on the front but both the “International Laws of Contract Bridge” and “International Auction Bridge Scoring” on the back. The blocks, and these very varied sets, were all produced by De La Rue, now designated as the “Official Publishers to the Portland Club”.



⁹ See Tony Hall, W.D & H.O. Wills Playing Card promotion of the early 1930s, June 2015, The World of Playing Cards



However, during the 1930s serious card players on both sides of the Atlantic rapidly switched their allegiance to Contract Bridge which was evidently a much better game. It is difficult to know just when card producers felt sufficiently confident to drop the references to Bridge-whist, Auction and Royal Auction Bridge altogether.

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