

Piquet: the game and its artifacts

by Tony Hall

Piquet may be the oldest card game which is still played today with origins going back to early 16th Century. And yet, the cards and paraphernalia designed for the game are relatively rare, or misunderstood, compared with those for other games such as whist, bezique and cribbage. Alongside my substantial collections of materials for these other three games¹, I have amassed a modest collection of books, markers and boxed sets for Piquet which is the subject of this brief essay.

Part of the explanation for the relative ignorance of the game may lie in the description of Piquet by Basil Dalton writing in 1921 when he said: *“Enthusiasts would certainly claim that it is the finest card game for two players; but, though a first favourite with all classes in France, and a “craze” with the “Bucks” of the Regency period in England, it has never become popular here in the sense in which “Cribbage” and “Nap” are popular.”*²

In 1873, Henry Jones (“Cavendish”) published the first edition of “Cavendish on Whist”. My copy, here, is the 9th edition published by De La Rue in 1899. However, a lot happened between 1873 and 1899.



According to subsequent writers on the subject, it was this book from Cavendish which reintroduced and popularised Piquet in Britain, being the first to do so since Hoyle’s Treatise on the subject in 1744. It was Cavendish who encouraged the Portland & Turf Clubs to draw up a Code of Laws which was reproduced in full in his 1873 book as a prelude to his scholarly analysis of the origins of the game and treatise on how to play. The game, as reintroduced by Cavendish in 1873 was a version known as *au cent* as the game was popular in France and had traditionally been played up to 100 points. However, within ten years this version of the game was almost entirely superseded by a version dubbed “Rubicon Piquet”. This necessitated the Portland and Turf Clubs up-dating their Laws of play. Henry Jones was a key member of the five-man Portland Club Committee which produced the draft which was eventually endorsed by both clubs and published in January 1882 as “The Laws of Piquet”. This is the version reproduced in the 1899 edition of Cavendish’s seminal work.

¹ See various articles on the World of Playing Cards website.

² Basil Dalton, The Ten Best Card games for Two, Grant Richards Ltd., 1921.



Although after 1873 he was not the only writer on the subject of Piquet, Cavendish was clearly seen as the main authority. Of the rest, Louis D'Aguilar Jackson under the name of "Aquarius" in this tiny volume "Piquet and Cribbage" (1883) writes *"There is a peculiarity in most English books on Piquet. So many matters are left in doubt, that it appears that the writers copied from each other without knowing the game"*.³



W. H. Peel⁴ writing as "Berkeley" in his Club Series edition of "Piquet and Rubicon Piquet" (1890) recognises the importance of the earlier writer, and directs his readers *"with all confidence"* to "Cavendish on Whist".

It was Cavendish to whom De La Rue turned to produce their pocket guide, first published in 1890. This is my 6th edition dated 1898.



Interestingly, I also have a further 6th edition with an identical text on the game, but this one is dated 1910; only the advertisements at the end are different. Whilst the first copy extols the virtues of the "Pelican Self-feeding Pen" and the "Isobath Constant-Level inkstand", the latter advertises boxed sets for Piquet, Bridge and Poker Patience "in various leathers" (see below).

In 1895, Chas. Goodall & Son commissioned Angelo Lewis ("Professor Hoffman") to produce the first edition of their booklet on Piquet and he manages to write his 44 page summary without a single reference to his influential rival.

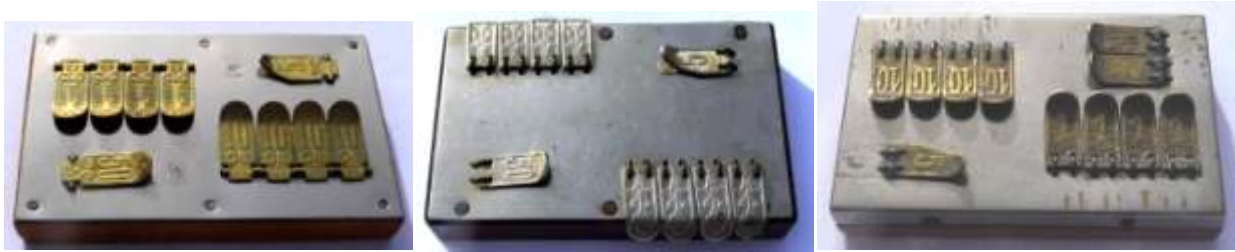


Markers

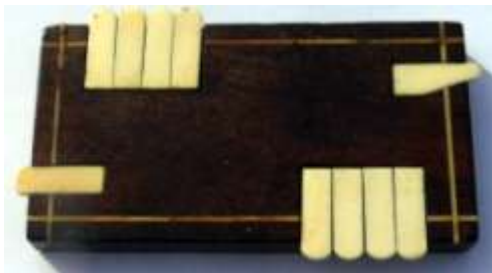
Given that in the 19th Century the game was most popular in France, it is not surprising that many of the Piquet markers used in Britain were of French design and origin. The most favoured design appears to be sheet metal on a wooden base with hinged flaps. Each player would have their own. Here are a few of examples.

³ Jackson was to write any number of books on various card games between 1883 and 1890, as well as books on engineering, hydraulics, surveying, canals and culverts and logarithms to name but a few.

⁴ Peel under the name of "Berkeley" wrote a number of books in the George Bell & Sons "Club Series" including Bezique & Cribbage, Ecarte and Euchre, Card Tricks and Puzzles, Draughts and Backgammon, Dominoes and Solitaire, and Croquet, as well as book on Roulette for another publisher. Whilst at times it is difficult to understand the 19th century preference for writing under a pseudonym, it is thought that, as a lawyer, Peel considered it potentially damaging to be publicly associated with games, and in particular Card Tricks. Under the circumstances it is perhaps worth noting that his first edition of "Bezique and Cribbage" was "suppressed" by the publisher as its contents were "mainly pirated from Cavendish" without his agreement. Henry Jones agreed to the next edition which was the same work "but greatly condensed".



There are also plenty of examples using the Goodall-style “pop-ups. This one is quite stylish and no doubt relatively expensive in wood and ivory with brass inlay.



and this one, very basic.



This pair is plainer in a variety of hard woods.



All of the above allow players to mark their scores up to 100 – the usual winning score for a game of piquet. The metal French markers are marked on their moveable flaps, as 1, 5, 10 and 50. Players using the wooden versions with no numbers inscribed would presumably just have to know the value of the various pop-ups!

However, I must confess that the next two examples are a bit of a mystery.

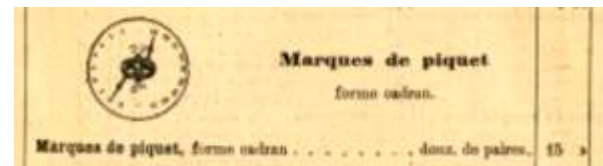
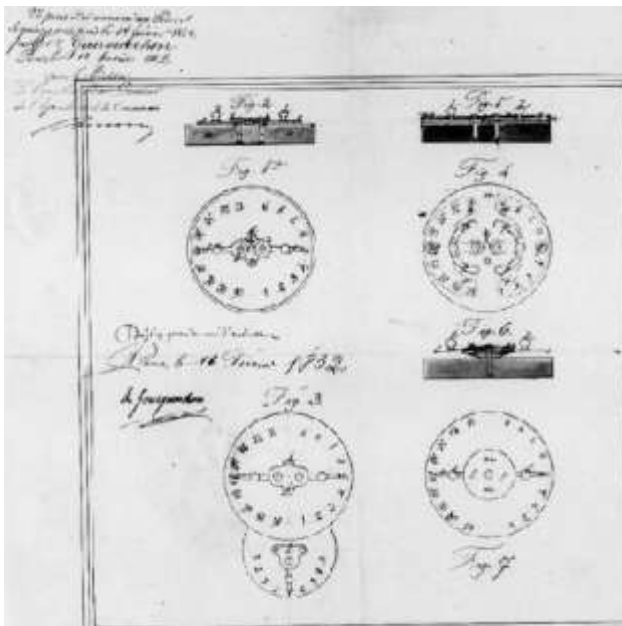


They follow the standard pattern for piquet, and yet they have an extra pop-up peg and are marked to count in 10s, and 100s up to 1000. They could obviously be used to score piquet but they may have been designed primarily for other games.

The next Piquet marker has a wholly original design and is a favourite of mine.



These were designed in France by Emmanuel Jean-Baptiste Gouguechon who filed this patented design in 1852. It was marketed by “Watilliaux”, the French publisher of games and toys between 1874 and 1908. This yellow catalogue entry is from 1903.



Boxed sets

The renewed enthusiasm for the game in Britain encouraged all the main game producers to offer boxed sets. De La Rue provided a range of styles in a variety of leathers.⁵

⁵ The cheapest of these sets at 11s 3d in 1898 would be almost £70 in today's prices. These were not cheap items.



My first example is the one illustrated above and dates from the end of the 19th century.



It is a beautiful example in just about perfect condition. It comprises two (unopened) packs of King Henry the VIII "Dexter" Harry's cards, two matching leather-backed score pads with triangular pencils and Cavendish's Pocket Guide to Piquet (6th edition) dated 1898. I am never sure how an item of this kind can survive its 120 years and look as if it has just left the shop which first sold it. A remarkable survivor.

This second example offers purchasers a choice of games, catering for both Piquet and Whist.



It has compartments at the side for the wood and ivory whist markers, and spaces underneath the removable tray (containing two packs of cards) for piquet markers. The Cavendish pocket guide for Whist (9th edition) is dated 1905, and the equivalent for Piquet (6th edition) is dated 1910. The Cards are De La Rue and of the period but do not match and therefore at least one pack is not original to the box. The “Piquet” font on the lid is identical to that on the first box and so there is little doubt that this box too is from De La Rue, albeit slightly later, somewhere just before the outbreak of WW1.⁶

The next example is a very different design but has a very similar leather texture to the first two and carries the identical Piquet logo on the lid. Undoubtedly it is also by De La Rue and from sometime around the turn of the 19th century.



⁶ This box carries the gold lettering imprint of the retailer: A. Livingston of Finchley Road, London.

This next example may be De La Rue – all of its current contents are from that source – but this is not otherwise verified.



The box is made of similar material to those above, and it contains identical score pads, rule book and cards from the period, but the shape and style is entirely different and, perhaps crucially, the font on the lid is not the same.

The origin of my final example is very easy to identify and is the most recent. It is a Goodall & Son box design and materials (identical to those used for their Kuhn Kahn sets⁷) containing two unopened packs of Goodall & Son Piquet cards and their Angelo Lewis Pocket Guide (19th edition), dated 1928 which confirms the box as dating from the late 20s/early 1930s.

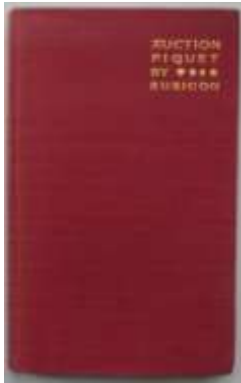


The Guide was published six years after De La Rue had absorbed Goodalls, continuing to produce many of the Goodall lines from the original Camden workshop, but carrying both of the company names.

⁷ See Tony Hall, Kuhn Khan, The World of Playing Cards

And Finally...

In 1920 Methuen published "Auction Piquet" by "Rubicon". This was the first attempt early in the 20th Century to beef up the traditional game of Piquet by adding pre-play bidding, very much as Whist had evolved into Auction Bridge by this time.



This slim volume (119 pages) was written by none other than Sir Arnold Henry Moore LUNN (1888-1974), a renowned English traveller, sportsman and writer of numerous books including everything from the History of Skiing to John Wesley., from Revolutionary Socialism to the Italian lakes. He was knighted in 1952 for services to skiing and Anglo-Swiss relations. As far as I can ascertain the only one of his dozens of books written under a pseudonym was his book on Auction Piquet!

He describes the game as being invented at Oxford (he was a scholar at Balliol College) but *"it did not attain its present form until it had been played for two and a half years by an enthusiastic circle of British prisoners of war. Captivity"*, he argues, *"is an acid test of a card game"*. It is difficult not to conclude that Lunn and a few of his Oxford University chums had devised this version of the game whilst they were students, and one or more of them spent time in a German POW camp for a large part of WW1 and thus had the opportunity to try it out on others. Ordinary Piquet, he asserts, lacks variety and "cannot compare for interest with a good foursome at Bridge". Hence the "Auction Piquet Club" (unspecified) sought to spice the game up with a set of Laws for a new version of this traditional pursuit.

As far as I can tell this was the first and last edition of this particular work and references elsewhere to this form of the game are scant.

As always, I would be pleased to hear from any reader who can add to or subtract from any or all of the above.

Tony Hall

October 2018