

THE CUE COLLECTOR

by Andy Hunter

Cue manufacturers such as Thurston's, Burroughes & Watts, Ashcroft and Padmore, would often personalise cues for their customers. This could be applied to any of their range of cues; for example John Roberts, Joseph Bennett, William Cook and Charles Dawson. This personalisation would take the form of an additional badge with the individual's signature or initials. Typically, these may be in the form of a silver diamond, or a piece of ivory placed above the normal badge, or as a full silver plate (as illustrated). Such cues were often made for the wealthy, and are now quite rare.

At a customer's request, modifications could also be made to the length of cues, so that they were constructed to other than the recognised standard, which on early cues was 55¾" and from the 1920's became 58". When they reduced the overall length, they would also adjust the butt so that it remained in proportion to the cue, a normal butt being 17½"-18" long. I have seen a 53"-54" cue with a 15" butt, and being in proportion, (about 30% of the overall length) would have been made this way. This provides a good test to determine whether a shaft has been shortened, and therefore of reduced value to a collector.



A Burroughes & Watts cue with a silver presentation plate

Pear Shafted Cues

Between the early 1870s and 1930s top of the range cues would be made with a "steamed" pear shaft, which has a reddish colour. The wealthy would buy a pear shafted Peall, Ashcroft or Willy Cook, or they could have been made as prizes in a major tournament. If you get a good pear shafted cue you couldn't get better, it is better than ash or maple to use. Pear has a tendency to warp so it is hard to get a stable cue. If you do get a stable, old, pear shafted cue that plays well, never part with it as you will not easily be able to find another. Because of this, pear shafted cues are more valuable than ash or maple, with one exception—the J. P. Mannock. The majority of Mannock's cues were made from pear and this devalues them with the result that the ash or maple shafted Mannock's are rarer and more valuable.

The Butt

Cue-butts were generally made with a larger diameter than an ordinary cue and about 5ft in length. They could be used in the same way as a cue, with a rest, for balls otherwise out of reach, or by using the butt to strike the ball. Long after the cue was the accepted implement for billiards, the butt was still being used for playing a ball up the table to strike another in baulk. The true central striking greatly increasing the accuracy of such strokes. This implement only disappeared after 1885 when the rules were changed so that all strokes must be made with the tip of the cue. The "half-butt" a longer example of the "cue-butt" remains in current terminology as a legacy of these early days.

I have recently seen two early examples of a "cue-butt" (pictured). Both made by Thurston's, one was in pear wood with a 24" bog-oak splice in the front. It was in a hand-made wooden case which had been made to the exact size of the cue. This is very rare, and because of its rarity valued at whatever price is asked, and the purchaser is prepared to pay. The other butt cue was made from mahogany and not quite so rare.



Two Thurston's "cue-butts" together with a specially made case from c.1820

People can confuse a butt cue with the later rack butt cue, which is made from ash with a Thurston & Co badge. It is knowledge and experience which allow you to discern between the two. A cue which has "Thurston, 14 Catherine Street" is dated before 1850. The design and records of these two butt cues date them to around the 1820s. After 1850 the badge said "Thurston & Co." After 1879 the address changed to "14-16 Catherine Street". The pear shafted butt cue is probably an example of one of the first cues that is now used for billiards and snooker. A lot of people who buy and sell cues do not go into this sort of depth when dating them. If you are buying a cue or wish someone to look at one, seek the advice of the right people or the cue may be incorrectly valued.

Burroughes & Watts

Burroughes & Watts are one of the best known cue makers. I have previously written about the "Mannock", but they also produced a wide range of top cues including the "Burwat Champion", "Ye Old Ash",

"Mascot" and "Sidney Smith"; as well as a number of other cues named after professional players.

The Burwat Champion : Alex Higgins helped to make the Burwat Champion one of their most famous cues, when he made a national appeal for a replacement after breaking his own. The Burwat Champion was the result of experimentation by the cue makers during the 1890s and the design was first registered in 1895/6. It proved to be one of the most popular cues that Burroughes & Watts ever sold and it was produced in three distinct editions.



A first edition Burwat Champion cue (above) and a later edition below.



The first edition has an Indian rosewood butt with a satin wood inlay and a rosewood front splice. It had a large oblong badge with a square back, which was cut into the butt and the overall shape was that of a billiard cue. The shaft was ash or maple, and I have heard of, but never seen, a pear shaft. The first edition is the most difficult to find, and made more valuable, on account of the Indian rosewood butt. [£200-250]

I have seen another version of the first edition cue where a very light rosewood butt has been substituted, otherwise all the original details are the same. This

replacement wood may have been a manufacturing transition between the first and second editions. [£170-220]

The rosewood was completely replaced in the second edition which had an ebony butt, satin wood inlay and tulip front splice. [£150-200] The interim and second editions are relatively common from a collector's point of view, but they are quite good playing cues, and worth buying for this purpose.

The woods for the butt and inlay of the third edition were the same as the second, the difference coming in the front splice which was cocobald wood. The badge was also slightly different, being more rounded at the back. These would have ash or maple or possibly pear shafts. [£150-200]



Two examples of a "second edition" Ye Old Ash cue showing the different styles of lettering



Ye Old Ash : This cue was named after the wood which was used to produce the first edition. In the early 1920s, Burroughes & Watts acquired a quantity of 50-80 year-old ash from a shipyard and used it to manufacture this cue. Although it had just a plain ebony butt on a plain ash shaft, it was the most expensive cue they produced at the time. The old ash was a deep dark red colour. [£250-300]

When this limited supply of ash ran out they continued to make it using seasoned ash. This was not as old and looked like the ash of today, a honey colour. This second edition had a striped ebony butt and the badge was slightly different in shape, and smaller. Some of the badges

for second edition cues have "hollow" lettering made up of parallel lines. [£200-250]

The Eureka : The Eureka is a double-butted cue, the first edition having four striped ebony splices above four tulip splices. They would have maple or ash shafts and I have heard of, but not seen, a pear shaft. [£250+]

The second edition has a jet black ebony butt above tulip. The collector will usually want the first edition. The second edition is a reasonable player although personally I find them too thin and the shape of the butt feels a little strange. People do like the double butted design which makes them quite a fancy cue. [£200]

The Mascot : This cue has a plain ebony butt with a large green veneer and an ebony front splice. There are two designs of the badge either a square or circle with green and black writing. [£120-160] I have also seen a round yellow and a round green badge both with black writing. These coloured badges are quite rare. [£150-200]

I will write about the Sidney Smith cue in a future article.