

THE CUE COLLECTOR

by Andy Hunter

W. A. Camkin

W. A. (Bill) Camkin was a well-known promoter of billiards and snooker tournaments throughout the 1920's and 30's. Walter Lindrum was under Camkin's management when he made his first record-breaking tour of England during the 1930-31 season. On his departure, Lindrum marked his appreciation of Camkin's management by presenting him with an illuminated address, inscribed: "From Walter Lindrum to W. A. Camkin". The first World Professional Snooker Championship was also promoted by Camkin with the closing stages being played at his match-room in Birmingham in 1927.

Camkin established a business bearing his name which was involved with renovating and supplying billiard tables. By the mid-1920's they had outlets in Birmingham, Oldbury and Stoke-on-Trent and at this time Camkin sold a controlling interest in the company to Orme & Sons. In 1929 he resigned as managing Director of Camkin Ltd, which continued to trade under this name, and became involved with a new company called Birmingham Billiards Ltd. It was this company which marketed the "W.A. Camkin" cue which they began to advertise in 1935.

This cue was made as both hand and machine-spliced, and for the examples I have seen, each type has identical ebony butts and a front splice with a green veneer and a walnut burr. They have ash, hornbeam or greenheart shafts and a square badge inscribed "The "W. A. Camkin personally designed and selected cue". The hand spliced would be valued at £150-250 as this is fairly rare. The more common machine spliced would be worth between £70-120.

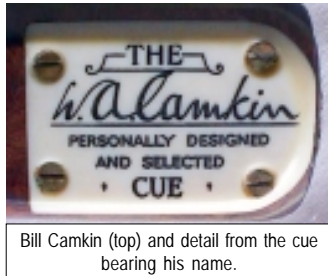
When originally supplied, these cues had a small square of red plastic film affixed to a point just above the splice and marked with the letter "B". The purpose of this is uncertain, but it could have been to indicate the point of balance. These would usually have been removed so any cues having this original feature intact would be worth from £10-15 more than the values given. All of the Camkin cues I have seen have been well made playing cues.

Madam Strebor

Madame Strebor first appears in the 1906-07 season when she was introduced to the public by the John Roberts. The real name of the lady, who was a pupil of Roberts, is not known. Madame "Strebor" is almost certainly a pseudonym, being "Roberts" spelt backwards.

Always looking for new ideas and promotions, Roberts obviously felt that the novelty of a professional lady billiard player would attract the paying public. Although the ladies game had been pioneered some years previously in London by Grace Fairweather and Ella Collins, Roberts, with the typical style of this great showman, gave her a flying start by announcing her as "the world's champion lady cueist".

By 1911 John Roberts had



Bill Camkin (top) and detail from the cue bearing his name.



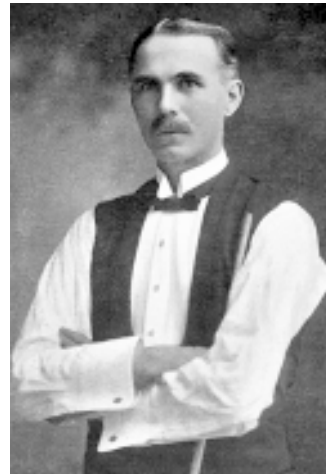
The Madam Strebor picture badge shows her playing a shot at the table

found a new lady prospect in Ruby Roberts (no relation) who he brought back from a tour of Australia and Madame Strebor was again brought out to provide the opposition for her debut in London. One periodical of the time reported "Madame Strebor probably knows a great deal more about the game than Miss Roberts, but is heavily handicapped by a rather nervous retarding of the cue in its swing and a resultant somewhat prodding action".

No doubt the "Strebor" cue was part of the initial promotion, which being relatively short-lived is reflected in its rarity. The cue has a mahogany butt with an ash shaft. The shape of the badge is rather unusual, but interestingly is the same as that used on the John Roberts picture badge cue. The image depicts the lady herself in the process of playing a shot, with an adjacent facsimile signature. These cues are very difficult to find and would be valued between £300-400.

Tom Aiken

Tom Aiken was one of the best players ever produced by Scotland and dominated professional Billiards in that country winning the North of Scotland Championship in 1896 from his base in Aberdeen, then successfully claiming The Championship of Scotland in 1902 following the death of the previous holder, Joe Sala.



Tom Aiken: undefeated Champion of Scotland from 1902-1926

That particular game which was played at the Unionist Hall, Aberdeen and Burroughes & Watts had donated a silver shield, as a new trophy for this championship. Aiken became the first holder of this shield, winning the two-week match very easily. The closing stages were marred by an objection against the table from his opponent Tom Rae, who at this time was hopelessly behind in the match. The Secretary of the Billiard Association, Mr. Sydenham Dixon, was summoned from London to

check the complaint, but found that the table was all right and protest was groundless. Rae never challenged for the Scottish championship again, later moving to London.

Aiken also made an impact on the professional circuit in London where he played in several of the Burroughes & Watts tournaments, making his first appearance in 1897. These matches involved a long trip from his rooms in Aberdeen, but such journeys were necessary to find any worthy opponents. He later took premises in Edinburgh, and played against most of the top professional players in their exhibition tours of Scotland, but was never tempted to move closer to the Capitol to further his career. He had the unique distinction of having won every game he played against the great John Roberts Jr. Aiken modestly ascribed this to the "massive" starts which Roberts insisted on giving to him. Roberts was sufficiently impressed by Aiken that he made an unsuccessful attempt to recruit him to his management in 1912, before eventually settling on a young Tom Newman.

Amongst his best performances was a spot-stroke break of 1,018 made in 1897 and ten years later, using the subsequently banned "cradle cannon" technique, he completed a game of 16,000-up with a break of 7,172 unfinished! His best break under the later rules which restricted both these strokes, was one of 612 in 1914.

His last success in the Scottish Championship came in 1926 at the age of 51, and shortly afterwards he retired from competitive play in order "to give others a chance", although a lack of credible local opposition and failing health were also offered as reasons for his decision.

The Aiken's cue has an Indian rosewood butt and an ash shaft. The badge is oblong shape with an arched top, inscribed "the Aiken's Champion Cue". The current value would be between £250-350.