

THE CUE COLLECTOR

by *Andy Hunter*

In 1910, an Australian youth called George Gray almost single-handedly caused a huge revival of interest in billiards in England. He also popularised a scoring technique which was so readily adopted by ordinary club players, that for the first time in the history of the game, excessive scoring by Amateurs resulted in a rule being introduced to limit its use. This was of course the "red-ball game" which had continued to mature long after Gray had departed these shores for the last time in 1914.

Joseph George Gray was born at Albert Park, South Melbourne, Australia on 28th March 1891 where his father was running the billiard room at the Bull & Mouth Hotel. At the age of 12, he began strict tuition aimed at developing him into a red-ball player. George later said of his father's unorthodox teaching methods "My father made me the subject of an experiment. He had a theory that, whereas to acquire the necessary skill for top of the table play would take me many years, losing hazard play could be acquired in less than half the time, and would yield bigger results."

He first came to the attention of the English billiards press in 1908 when, in a match against Fred Lindrum on 25th August of that year, he made a break of 836, of which 831 were scored from the red ball. His unusual style was described as follows: "He stands with his feet parallel and twenty-four inches apart, makes a high bridge, almost touches the cue with his chin, and plays a stiff, pushing stroke". His opponent, Fred Lindrum, also observed "Nobody understands the follow-through better than Gray, who finishes the stroke with the splicing of the cue in the bridge hand".

However, not everyone was impressed with his style, with J. P. Mannock making this comment at the midpoint of his first English season: "As to Gray as a billiard player, for youth of eighteen he is exceedingly good. It is a pity that the gentlemen who coached him did not teach him a correct stand. He is ungraceful and unsteady and that causes the player to miss a great many strokes that are not run-through losers into the middle pockets. He does not shine at the all-round game as he might have done if he had been taught to stand properly".

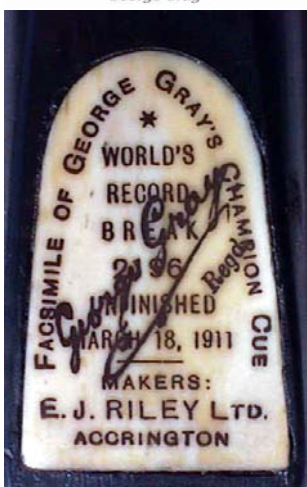
He left Australia for his first English tour on 15th June 1910, playing his first public match in Leeds in October of that year, his tour being sponsored by Riley's, the billiard table manufacturer. His road manager and regular opponent, was the Yorkshire professional Champion, George Nelson. Gray was based in Leeds, moving there shortly after his arrival in the country and Nelson set up a billiard room to give him time to practice under English conditions. However, this did not extend to using the native ivory balls. These were virtually unknown in Australia and Gray had learnt to play using composition balls, preferring Crystalate, although he also made several of his biggest breaks with Bonzoline balls. At this time, Gray was playing with an Ash cue spliced with a plain ebony butt which weighed just 15½ oz.

The public interest in billiards had been in general decline for some time, but Gray's arrival had been preceded by sensational press reports of the youngster's achievements. No overseas player had ever caused such speculation and anticipation prior to his arrival. His record in Australia went before him to the extent that there was great expectation that he would soon produce his first 1,000 break. In this, Gray did not disappoint, making his first 1,000 break within weeks of his arrival and continuing with a further 22 breaks over 1,000 in the course of 31 matches during the 1910-11 season. In a break of 1,340 made in Cardiff in January 1911, he took 289 centre pocket in-offs before being compelled to play for the top pocket.

The highest of his breaks was 2,196 unfinished against Cecil Harverson in a match of 8,000 up played at the Holborn Town Hall, London, from 13th-18th March 1911. When he passed 2,000 his performance was greeted with rounds of cheers, the uproar lasting several minutes. His opponent remained in his seat for three full sessions, but retained "the



George Gray



demeanour of the man who has dined well" seemingly more than content just to watch proceedings. His attitude was not lost on spectators, The Billiards Times reporting that: "At the call of 'Game' on the Saturday night, the audible and fervent remark was heard: 'Well played, Gray; well sat, Harverson!'" The break also included an unprecedented sequence of 1,620 points from the red ball, but although both were records at that time, neither were officially recognised by the Billiard Association. This was by far the highest break of Gray's career, the next best being 1,576 (both with Crystalate) and his highest with Bonzoline was 1,199. However, the novelty of watching Gray's perfection, soon became boring for the paying public and on his next tour the following season, the houses which had previously been packed were now sparsely attended.

Although many expected Gray to challenge for the Professional Championship, he initially declined to enter in an attempt to pressurise the Billiard Association into adopting the use of composition balls. Being unable to change the ruling he was eventually forced to accept the situation and entered the 1914 Championship. For a few months before his scheduled match, Gray played exclusively with ivories and seemed to have mastered the narrower throw of these balls, twice passing the 1,000 break from red ball play. However, he could not reproduce this form in the Championship and was easily beaten by Tom Reece in the first round.

With the intervention of the first World War, Gray returned to Australia and would not challenge for the title again. Shortly after his return to Australia he had a nervous breakdown and spent some time in a sanatorium. After this he was never the same player again. In 1921, on tour in Malaya, he gave a generally disappointing performance, sometimes failing to record a break over 50. It was reported at this time that he was suffering from an affliction which caused

his cue arm to halt on the follow-through. Gray's last significant match came in 1934, when he played Fred Lindrum for the Australian Championship in Adelaide, South Australia. Gray displayed woeful form, and during the week long match failed to make a single century break. Lindrum won the one-sided match 18,999-4,147. In later life he established a guest house at West Point, Magnetic Island, where he lived with his family. He died two days before his birthday on the morning of 26th March 1970.

Riley's cues

Gray's original sponsor, Riley's, retained the sole rights to make his cues although another manufacturer G. W. Briggs of Harrogate seems to have also produced their own version. By far the most commonly seen George Gray cue is Riley's "George Gray Record Break" which has a tombstone shaped badge which is superimposed with the player's signature. I have seen the badge illustrated also carrying the word "Registered" and an alternative date of 1913. The badges were produced in different sizes and made from different materials. The earlier cues can be distinguished by a bone or ivory badge which is larger in size and later cues have a smaller composition badge.

All of these cues usually have an ash shaft a plain ebony butt, however, it is also known to exist with a snakewood butt. They are all of a typical shape for Riley cues of this period. One pointer to the date of manufacture is the presence of a single initial stamped into the shaft below the weight stamp. This initial would identify the person responsible for making the cue and they tend to appear on later versions. The earlier cues are valued between £150-250 and the snakewood butted cue up to £350.

Special presentation cues were also known to be produced. These would have a double badge with the upper one typically commemorating a tournament victory.

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G. W. Briggs

The other George Gray cue I have seen is similar to the Riley version, but the badge has the top of the tombstone shape truncated and the base is slightly rounded. The badge had exactly the same information on it but did not have his signature. This cue was made by G. W. Briggs (Harrogate) it has an ash shaft and an ebony butt, the badge was ivory. As this is a rare cue, I would say it is the rarest of the George Gray cues, it is valued at £250-350. The cue of this type that I am aware of, belongs to professional player Gary Rogers.

Stevens and Son

W. Stevens & Sons were established as a billiard table manufacturer in 1830 and had a long history in the London billiards trade. They continued to operate until 1967 when they were taken over by John Bennett & Co; by which time they had become W. D. Stevens & Sons.

Unusually, all of the early Stevens "Match" cues were machine spliced. The earliest cues have a big round bone badge on a wide butt which is typical of an early billiard cue. The butt would have been made from either ebony or mahogany although I have only seen these with an ash shaft. At the base of the cue, half would be fitted with leather so that it could be turned around and used as a butt cue. These cues were produced from around 1870, and have a rarity value in that they were all machine spliced.

In addition to the shape of the butt, later cues are distinguished by the absence of the concentric ring on the badge. All of these cues, regardless of date, would be worth between £100-200 if in good condition.

I have recently heard of a hand spliced by R. Stevens and Son, a company which was later taken over by W. Stevens. It is not know whether the proprietors of these companies were related, but it seems likely. This would be of a similar value to the earlier machine spliced cue.



Examples of the Stevens Match Cue with the earlier version on the left

One Hundred Years ago ...

Spring tip

Among the various improvements brought forward from time to time in the Billiard world, are those having for their object, the secure fastening of the tip to the point of the cue. The very latest idea in this direction is that of hollowing out the top of the cue, inserting a thin spiral spring and fastening the same securely, about a couple of inches from the top, by means of a brass pin. The tip, upon the same principle as an ordinary boot button, is made to attach to the loose end of the spring inside the cue, and by this means kept securely in position. The idea is that of a gentleman well known in Leeds, and we are informed that all the best players in that City now have their cues fitted in this style—*The Billiard Review*, September 1895

SOUTH EAST NEWS

County billiards

The annual South-East Counties team billiards organised this year by the Kent association took place at the Sittingbourne club on 2nd March 2003. For the third successive year the West Sussex side of Richard Sandell, Dave Liley, Colin Nicholson and Maurice Wickens emerged clear winners from what was otherwise a very tight competition, with only 15 points covering the three other teams. Final Scores: 1. West Sussex 2815; 2. Kent 2308; 3. Surrey 2303; 4. East Sussex 2293.

WORLD LADIES CHAMPIONSHIP

Green Baize, Swindon

Wednesday 16th April 2003 - All games one hour

Kelly Fisher from Lye, Stourbridge, became the 2003 World Ladies Billiards Champion by defeating the No.1 seed and defending champion, Emma Bonney, 299-155 in the one-hour final. The Championship was held as a one-day event at the Green Baize club in Swindon on 16th April and attracted 16 entries, including representatives from India and New Zealand in addition to the various regions of the United Kingdom.

Fisher received £400 for her victory which included £50 for the highest break of 44 which she made on two occasions. Emma Bonney took £200 as runner-up.



Kelly Fisher is the new Ladies World Billiards Champion

Photo from Paw-Print Snooker Consultancy

Last 16: Emma Bonney (England) 212 Sharon Dickson (Wales) 172; Gaye Jones (England) 151 Marianne Lazardes (England) 86; Christine Sharpe (England) 138 Tina Owen-Sevilton (England) 104; Mandy Fisher (England) 135 Sarah Kingswell (England) 117; Caroline Walch (England) 128 Ramona Belmont (New Zealand) 109; Jane O'Neill (England) 131 Mary Hawkes (England) 82; Soumini Srinivas (India) 147 Jan Hughes (England) 74; Kelly Fisher (England) w/o Val Finnie (Scotland) scr. **Quarter-finals:** Emma Bonney 233 Gaye Jones 95; Christine Sharpe 171 Mandy Fisher 109; Caroline Walch 178 Jane O'Neill 148; Kelly Fisher (44, 32) 331 Soumini Srinivas 123. **Semi-finals:** Emma Bonney (36) 322 Christine Sharpe 100; Kelly Fisher (32) 264 Caroline Walch 158. **Final:** Kelly Fisher (44, 41) 299 Emma Bonney 155.

EASTERN COUNTIES

Eastern Counties Championship

A healthy entry of 29 players gathered at the Newmarket Snooker & Bowl for the twelfth Eastern Counties Billiards Championship. West Acre's Phillip Welham took the title by defeating Kettering's Matthew Sutton 204-189 in a very tightly fought final. Welham had previously recorded good wins over Ivan Chambers (Ely) and Sam Salter (Newmarket) in the quarter and semi-finals respectively. A break of 132, the highest in the competition, being the feature of his game against Chambers. Sutton had played equally well to better Michael Wright (St. Albans) and Jim Chambers (Ely) at the same stages of the competition.

Rushden's Dean Bavister, who is returning to the sport after a lay-off, produced some classy form to win the Plate competition, beating Keith Lloyd (Cambridge) 193-188 in the final. Dean Manders (Lincoln) defeated Peter Cooper to win the "Subsidiary Cup" for first round losers in the Plate.

Thanks are extended to all the management and staff at Newmarket and to the Tournament Director, Clive Scott who also officiated with referees Peter Cooper and David Smith. The trophies were presented by Mark Wildman, President of the Eastern Counties Billiards Association.

Results. Quarter-final: Phillip Welham (132, 57) 426 Ivan Chambers 155; Sam Salter 190 Arthur Reeve (Spalding) 186; Matthew Sutton (106, 62, 62) 345 Michael Wright 86; Jim Chambers 281 Mick White (Cambridge) 231. **Semi-finals:** Phillip Welham (78) 266 Sam Salter 219; Matthew Sutton (62, 55) 301 Jim Chambers (52) 99. **Final:** Phillip Welham 204 Matthew Sutton 189.

Norfolk Billiards Handicap

On 16th March, thirty-seven players took part in the Norfolk Billiards Handicap which was held at the Woodside SC, Norwich. The turn-out reflects the very strong state of billiards in this part of the World, and with fifteen juniors taking part is also a tribute to the hard work that has been put into development of the junior game in the region over the last six years. The event was won by Lee Daynes who defeated Colin McCarthy in the final. Frank Harper was the Tournament Director.

Eastern Counties Billiards League

Huntingdon 147 became first-division champions, finishing the season two points clear of Spalding with Cambridge "A" a further point behind. Matthew Sutton starred for Huntingdon, making three centuries during the course of the season, including the division's highest break of 147. He was ably supported by Matt Willard who also made a century and twelve others over 50 in his eight games.