

COLLECTABLES

The current obsession with on-line poker emphasises how the humble playing card is still a main feature of some people's entertainment.

A pack of playing cards gets quite a hard life. All that dealing and shuffling and cutting the pack takes its toll, and most decks have a short life. Examples that have survived for 100 years or more are

by the rich. The decks in use then might even have been hand-painted.

European packs have always had four suits, though the subjects of each would vary, depending on country of origin. The basic suits of playing cards which we are familiar with today appear to have originated in the French town of Rouen, which was the centre of card manufacture in the seventeenth century. The King, Queen

entertainment was very important.

It was not until the 1850s that the cards became 'double headed' – i.e. able to be viewed the same at top or bottom. And from about 1880 the value of the card was actually printed in the top left and bottom right corners, whereas previously you actually had to count the emblems.

Around this time cards also became thinner and more flexible so that they could be more easily shuffled. And the joker was also introduced – initially as just a blank extra card used in a particular American card game, but card makers quickly started designing their own distinctive jokers instead of using a blank.

Today, there's a strong demand for old playing cards dating back to the Edwardian period and earlier due to their distinct differences in design, and if they're in good condition they can fetch anything from £20 to £100 a set. Older



No numbers to help

cards from the 18th or early 19th centuries can fetch more amongst serious collectors. Makers' names to look out for include De La Rue, Grimaud of Paris and Piatnik of Vienna. Their cards were top quality and sometimes of slightly quirky design.

Clamouring for a top deck

Edwardian playing cards are prime target

popular with certain collectors, but even more modern packs will also be collectable if they have some novelty interest.

Playing cards are thought to have appeared in China or India, but they arrived in Europe around 1375.

However, it was another century or so before any recorded evidence of playing cards being used in England – and even then they were used only

and Jack are known as the court cards and the figures are normally depicted wearing French court dress.

By the Victorian period in the late 19th century, playing cards was a popular activity with men, women and children of every social class. There were many different card games constantly invented, as this was an age before radio and TV, and thus making your own

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