

EARLY ENGLISH GAMING COUNTERS

By Colin Narbeth

There is very little information about the gaming counters used in Great Britain. Perhaps the most useful is "Tickets and Passes of Great Britain and Ireland" by W.J. Davis & A.W. Waters, published by Burt Franklin, New York, NY and reprinted in 1973. Equally important is the Catalogue of the Montague Guest Collection of Badges, Tokens and Passes presented in 1907 to the British Museum.

From these we learn that gambling was a major pastime in the 17th century. A reference in Pepys Diary for January 1st 1667-8 recalls a visit to one of the famous gambling clubs, Groom Porters in which he describes the play with dice and some of the players. It is believed the club was in St. James's Palace and one of the counters was pictured in the Illustrated London News of Jan. 24, 1863.

By 1792 gambling was under much stricter control and John Lister of Norris Street, Haymarket in London was fined £200 for running a Gambling House. It was in the 18th century that London became famous for its gambling with clubs like White's, Brooks's, Boodles and the Cocoa Tree. White's Club, in St. James's Street, Piccadilly was one of the most exclusive clubs in the world. Few of the "chips" have survived from its early days, but some coloured ivory and shaped pieces in guineas are known. A few have the initials "GR" on them and Davis notes 5 to 100 guinea counters so marked with the statement "probably used by George IV at Carlton House." Romantic as that sounds a much more plausible suggestion comes from the British Museum catalogue of the Montague Guest collection, "In this series of White's gambling counters GR are the initials of George Raggett, proprietor of the club from 1812 -44".

Members of White's had a reputation for betting on just about anything. A letter from Horace Walpole recalls an occasion when a man collapsed at the door of the club. He was taken inside and bets were immediately made as to whether he would die or not! Protests were made when someone proposed medical attention - it would affect the fairness of the bet. "He was therefore left to himself and presently died -to the great satisfaction of those who had bet for that event."

Beau Brummell was a gambler often seen at Brooks's Club and was the subject of a satirical gambling cartoon by the famous artist, George Cruickshank. Brummell who ended his life in a madhouse in 1840, would bet high. Not everyone liked him! When, having lost a 1000 guineas at White's Club he called for the waiter to bring him a pistol in joking fashion, a gambler sitting opposite him produced two pistols and laid them in front of Brummell. "I am happy to offer you the means without troubling the waiter" he said.

Perhaps the most famous club still in existence is Crockfords. William Crockford started his working life as a fishmonger in Fleet Street with a side-line in bookmaking and the three-card trick. His club, named after himself, was a late starter - 1816. He realised that success depended on attracting top people. He made his name

when the Duke of Wellington became a member followed by Lord Chesterfield who is reputed to have lost over \$100,000 at the game of hazard (the forerunner of craps). Its very selective membership included three Lords - Rivers, Sefton and Grenville who managed to lose half a million dollars a piece in a single evening - which well and truly put Crockfords on the map! Disraeli was also a member but was unable to protect Crockford from being summoned before the House of Commons Committee on Gaming Houses.

Crockford would not answer their questions saying: "I do not feel myself at liberty to divulge the pursuits of private gentlemen". In that year, 1844, the committee authorised police to enter gaming houses if requested to do so by two householders. Crockford died the same year. The absolute privacy of Britain's gambling clubs had come to an end. But Crockford's remains Britain's top gambling establishment - many of its modern day chips made by Franklin Mint.



White's Club. 1 Guinea. Founded 1730



White's Club. "GR" (George IV or George Raggett). All Ivory. The 25 Gns (obv. & rev.) stained black. The 10 Gns. stained red and the 100 Gns. stained pink. Small white metal counter (Davis 71) showing the club building.



Boodles One Guinea. A famous club in Piccadilly in bygone times (all items from the author's collection)



A rare Cocoa Tree Club 25 Guineas unrecorded denomination for this club.