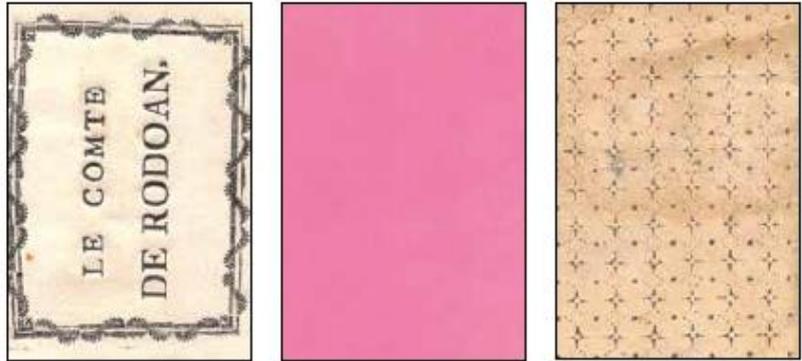


Card Design:

Decorated Card Backs

Plain Backs

Decorated card backs are essentially an English addition to the standard design. For more than 400 years from their origins and until about 1840, cards had nothing at all on the back – so it was simply ‘card-coloured’, which usually meant somewhere between pale ivory and beige. Occasionally, cards were stamped with a regular pattern, or had a layer of coloured paper on the back. Card backs are so useful and so simple that we have to ask why it took so long. The main benefit is that a picture or pattern can mask small scuffs and blemishes – on a plain card these marks are obvious and they mean that cards can be identified, which of course renders the pack useless for gambling and serious play. Before 1840, the problem was that the manufacturers did not have a printing technology that could reproduce anything more interesting.



Early Card Backs: Plain (Belgian with reverse printed as a calling-card – plain cards were often ‘recycled’), Plain colour (English), simple design (French)

Thomas De La Rue, Card Manufacturer

The pioneer was Thomas De La Rue, who learned printing as a newspaper apprentice in the Channel Islands, and then moved to London. De La Rue was an entrepreneurial spirit, and realised



that making playing cards was a huge opportunity as the tax on cards was falling and card games were gaining popularity beyond gambling games. His firm started making cards in 1832, and De La Rue obtained a patent to manufacture cards using lithographic printing. All the other card makers were reliant on wooden blocks to print the outlines and stencils help colouring them in. In other words, beyond inventing the card back, De La Rue revolutionised playing card making, taking it out of the artisans’ workshops and into fully manufactured production.



Cards by Hunt c. 1830 (wood block and Stencil) and De La Rue c. 1832 (lithography)

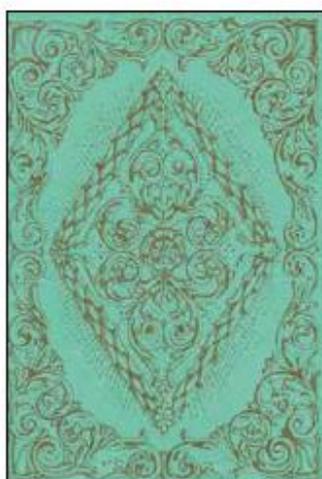
Printed Backs



In the early 1840s, when his printing techniques were fully established, De La Rue came to realise that his lithographic printing was quite capable of printing on the back of his cards. Not only that, but unlike the traditional faces, the backs could be printed with any designs he chose. With great foresight, he engaged Owen Jones, an architect and designer, to create high quality decorative backs. Between 1844 and 1873 or so, Owen Jones produced around 170 new designs.

These were naturally an immediate success – they made the cards far more attractive, and they made the backs less open to picking up marks. The idea was rapidly adopted everywhere cards were made.

Cards by De La Rue, designed in 1850 by Owen Jones for the Great Exhibition of 1851. Dedicated to the young Queen Victoria.



Early English backs by other makers. [L-R] Goodall, Reynolds and Whitaker.

Further Development

The Worshipful Company of Makers of Playing-Cards is the Livery Company in the City of London that has represented cardmakers since 1628. Every year since 1882 the Master of the Company has issued a pack with a back design chosen to represent a major anniversary or a major event in the preceding year, and these have become a very collectable series, although the first few years are now very hard to find. The current Master's Pack celebrates the 800th year of the Lord Mayor's show.

Card backs were soon used for advertising and for souvenirs too, and almost all the big brands and big charities have made cards with their own logos and slogans. It is possible today to have a large collection of cards with backs from only brewers and distillers, or airlines, or sporting venues including most of the modern Olympics. For many collectors nowadays, the card backs are more interesting than the faces. ■

Paul Bostock, September 2017

The author is a Court Assistant in the Worshipful Company of Makers of Playing Cards – see www.makersofplayingcards.co.uk Many more sets of cards are illustrated on the author's website www.plainbacks.com