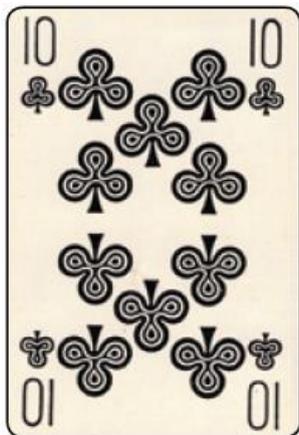


Card Design:

Special Cards for Bridge

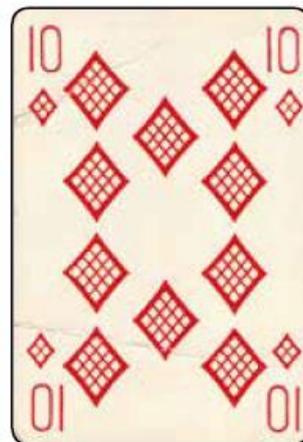
In 1925, Harold Vanderbilt drafted rules for the game of bridge as we know it. It was an immediate success, and grew so rapidly that the first World Championships were held just ten years later. With so many players enjoying bridge, cardmakers explored various ways of appealing to them.

No-Revoke Packs



'Fassette' cards by Waddington, 1930s.

The first innovation was 'no-revoke' packs, featuring efforts to make the suits 'more different'. This means players cannot accidentally play the wrong card or, less sportingly, deliberately show a wrong card and claim a mistake. No-revoke packs began in the 1930s, and the example below shown is a 'Fassette' pack by Waddington. The spades and hearts were unaltered, but the diamonds and clubs have white designs on the suit signs.



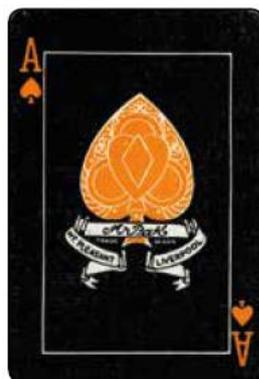
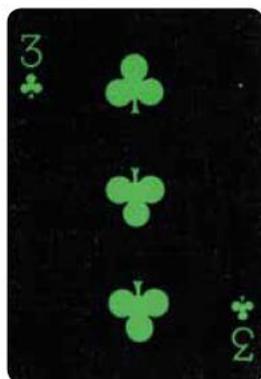
'Fassette' cards by Waddington, 1930s.

The no-revoke deck by Arpak of Liverpool is more colourful and extreme. They are printed in black and each suit has a different colour – green for clubs, white for diamonds, red for hearts and orange for spades. The idea was to make them stand out better in low light. These cards were not successful and are relatively scarce.

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It may be useful to explain the fairly new terms 'bridge-size' and 'poker size' for cards. Until recently, makers made cards in slightly different sizes and players used them for any game they chose. Modern cards are increasingly designated as 'bridge-' or 'poker-' sized, an idea from the US, most likely intended to sell more packs and to charge for the 'specialism'. In US Imperial units both sets are 3½ inches long, while pokersize is 2½ inches wide and bridge-size 2¼ inches wide.

Bridge players may well have seen bar-coded sets. These are for use in producing duplicate boards containing specific cards. This requires computer software that can read the codes and special machines for assembling hands of cards. However, card recognition has now moved on to the stage where computers can read standard cards, so bar codes are now needed only for the specific machines that use them.

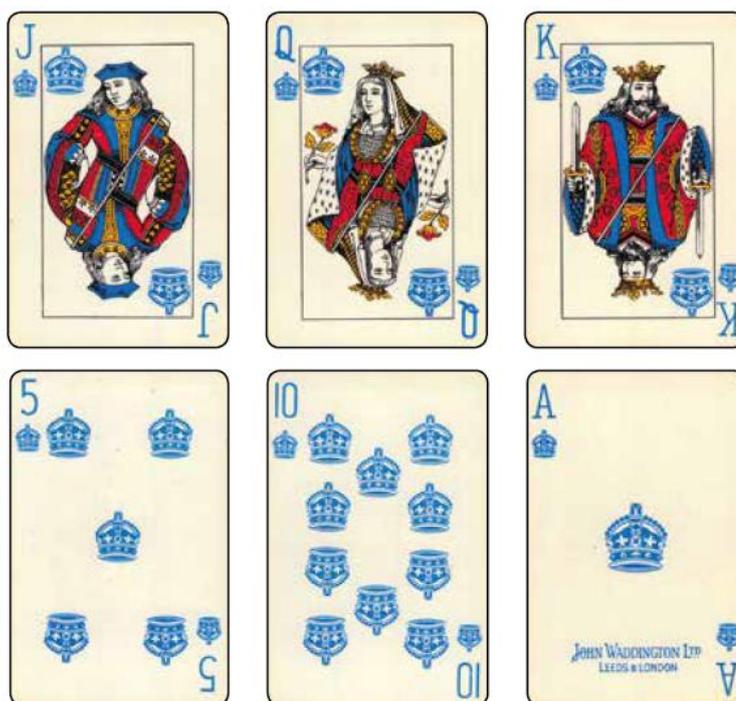


No-Revoke cards by Arpak, c 1940.

Five Suits, Anyone?

Both Waddington and De La Rue offered sets of 'Five suited bridge' – a more ambitious way of appealing to bridge players. The two five-suited bridge sets I have seen are the same – the fifth set is 'crowns', the suit signs are blue and the three court figures are copied over from standard French cards.

The illustration below shows the box and two wrapped packs lying flat and two packs on edge with the fifth suit wrapped separately. The box contains the new rules: each player is dealt 16 cards and declarer can swap the last card with one from his hand or dummy, when dummy is laid down. Crowns are the highest ranking suit in bidding and in scoring, and remain below no-trumps.



A sample of the 'Crown' suit from Waddington's 5-suit bridge set, 1940s

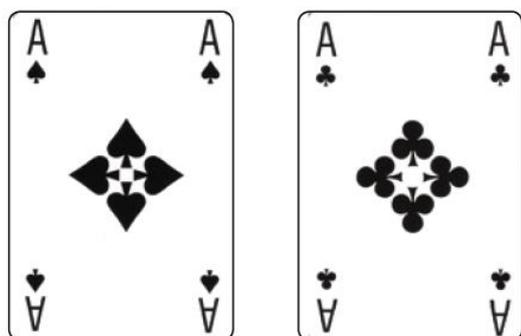
Bid levels from one to eight are for nine to sixteen tricks total. Small and grand slams remain at the six and seven levels and bidding and making eight is a 'royal' slam (i.e. all sixteen tricks, with a bonus roughly 1.5 times the grand slam).

No Signalling

Our final category is symmetrical cards, intended to prevent signalling. The theory is that asymmetric cards (odd-numbered spades, hearts and clubs) could be played the 'right' or 'wrong' way up. It could be that this shows weakness or strength in the suit, or whatever the pair chooses. Whether or not players used this kind of signalling, symmetrical cards were introduced in the 2000s that make it impossible.

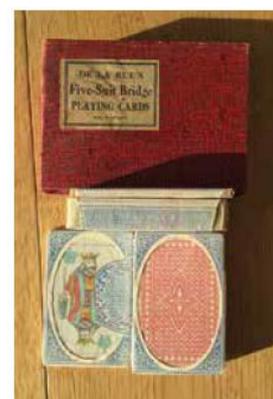
The Worshipful Company of Makers of playing cards holds an annual 'Inter-Livery bridge' with up to 64 pairs in all. In 2007 the Company introduced symmetric playing cards, but these were replaced in 2016 with regular standard cards. The reason was that in low lighting (and I promised to return to lighting), a number of players found that the Aces of Spades and Clubs (illustrated) are easily confused. The author has first-hand experience of this happening, once to partner while bidding and once to the opponents in play.

As we have seen often before, changes in card designs usually prove unpopular. ■



Worshipful Company of Makers of Playing Cards, 'Symmetrical' Bridge Cards, from 2007-2016.

De La Rue 'five-suit bridge', 1940s. See text for a description and outline rules.



Paul Bostock, December 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