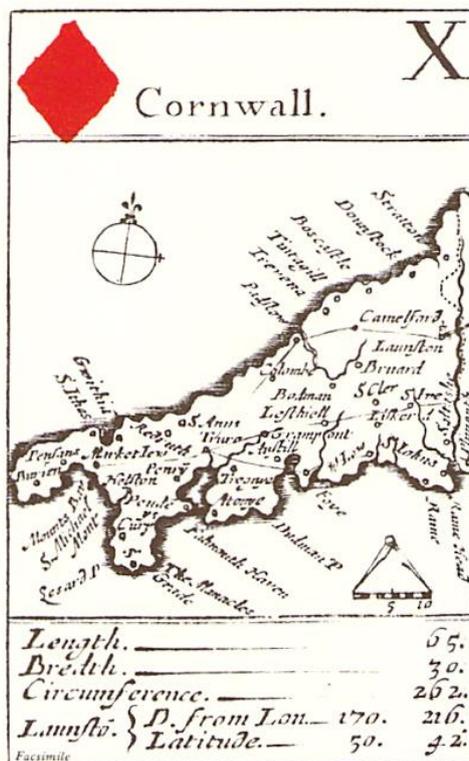


Card Design:

Facsimile Packs

Old playing cards are now rare, so that a specific and desirable pack may be very difficult or even impossible to buy (for example if the only known examples are in museums). Not surprisingly such packs are often expensive. Facsimiles and Reproductions? While these may sound second-best, the reality is that a copy is the only way to see some special packs, and might be good to have.

Our first example is a pack first made by Robert Morden in 1676. In this, each of the 52 cards shows a map of a County of England and Wales. Original seventeenth century maps are scarce, so this pack is of value to historians and geographers as well as to specialist playing-card collectors. In 2013 an original version of this pack sold at Sotheby's for £15,000. I have in front of me a very finely made facsimile by Harry Margary made in 1972 (see below) and copies of this pack are still on sale at just over £10. This enables me to enjoy these old maps just as they were intended – on a set of cards.

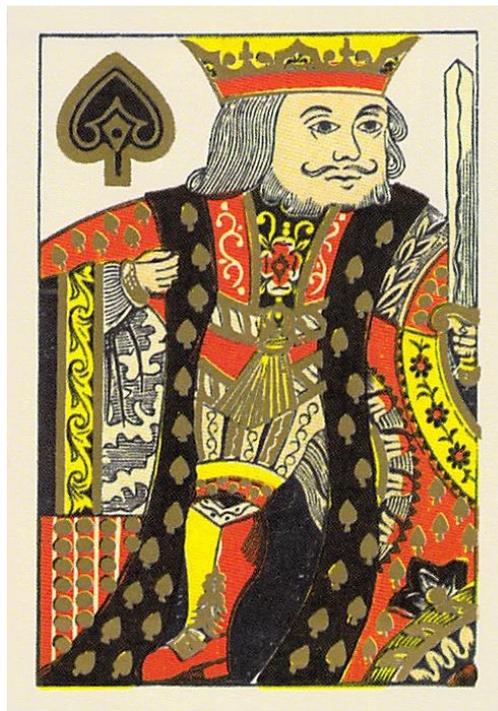


*Ten of Diamonds – Map of Cornwall by Morden
1676. Reproduction sets by Harry Margary, 1972.*

There are a number of contemporary packs around that feature older full length designs. One set, whose maker is not shown, is a very good reproduction of standard cards of around 1805 by James Hardy, a London cardmaker. The reproduction goes to the extent of having a paper wrapper and a string tied around just as the originals had and the finish of the cards is convincing too. Modern players could use these cards to play games that were popular in the 1800s without worrying about the value of the cards.

A similar example – again featuring standard cards by Hardy – was produced by brewers William Bass & Co in 1977. This set was made to celebrate the Company’s 200th anniversary. The cards are printed on modern stock, but it is a well-made set and its booklet gives a short history of playing-cards and instructions for playing some historically popular games.

US Games Systems have produced excellent copies of several early American decks, including an ‘illuminated’ set first made by Andrew Docherty in 1865. Illuminated decks were made with gold in the ink. In the image shown, all the gold areas would have featured this special ink, and the result is a very satisfying rich and bright finish.



Illuminated King of Spades, Andrew Dougherty & Co., 1865. Facsimile by US Games Systems Inc.

Simon Wintle, a contemporary card expert, has made cards in the old way using wooden blocks and stencils. While these are of great interest to collectors, they also have a practical use in filming. If people are seen playing cards in a period drama, directors want those cards to look right, and facsimiles allow that to happen without risking an historic and valuable set.

Many contemporary card makers have issued facsimiles. We have encountered some in previous articles, e.g. the fifteenth century German hunting deck and the sixteenth century Spanish deck, where originals would be impossible to own. The Fournier Museum has produced excellent versions of items in its collection, like its English hand-painted transformation pack and circular Indian Ganjifa cards. The French card maker B P Grimaud has similarly made a new version of a very early Cotta transformation pack of 1804, and examples of French packs from earlier centuries.

Some collectors feel that facsimiles risk devaluing the originals but I think the production of a facsimile underlines the importance of the original. So from ancient geographical and other illustrated cards, via old standard cards and transformations, the modern enthusiast can truly become involved in historic sets of cards that would otherwise be priced out of reach.



There is now a wide selection of facsimile packs - an opportunity to own copies of historically significant cards.

Paul Bostock, February 2018

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