

THE CUE COLLECTOR

by Andy Hunter

Willie Smith was one of the all-time greats of billiards and throughout the 1920's was generally regarded as the best player in the World. However, Smith was engaged in an almost constant dispute with the governing body (BA&CC) throughout his career which meant that during this period he entered the Championship only twice, 1920 and 1923, winning it on both occasions. In 1924, Smith became contracted to Burroughes & Watts who remained his sponsor for the rest of his years as a top professional. As the Championship was always held at Thurston's match rooms—the main competitor to Burroughes & Watts—it becomes easier to understand his reasons for not competing after this date.

Smith was the first professional to play with a brass ferrule fitted to his cue, although the innovation had been known since at least the 1880's. Several of his fellow professionals were initially inclined to scoff at the idea, but by 1930 all of the leading professionals had adopted this feature and it soon became common at all levels of play. The type of ferrules which would have been used in those days were about half the length of a modern ferrule and had a very thin wall. They were generally referred to as "pigeon rings" and were heat shrunk onto the cue. Modern ferrules are screwed on and therefore have a much thicker wall to accommodate the thread. This is a good way to tell if an original ferrule has been replaced, although such a replacement would not significantly affect the value of a cue. By 1923, Smith had changed the brass ferrule on his personal cue to one made from gold. This may not have been the best material for the job, as in 1929 the end of this cue broke off during a match against Walter Lindrum.

In addition to popularising ferrules, Smith's use of a relatively heavy cue of 18¾ oz; at a time when the "recommended" weight was 16½-17 oz; may well have contributed to the heavier weight of cue becoming fashionable.

During the 1928-29 season, the professional game in England switched to the use of composition balls and it was from this time that Smith's really big breaks began to flow. Prior to this date he had made only four breaks over 1,000 with a best of 1,176 which he achieved in 1927. During the 1928-29 season, using Crystalate balls, he made 15 breaks over 1,000. His highest being 2,743 made against Tom Newman in Manchester in November 1928. This was claimed as a record break for all round play (ie. without the predominance of specialist strokes). His second best break was 2,030 and was made against Clark McConachy during a tour of Australia in 1929. It was the highest break made in Australia to that date. Smith made all his biggest breaks by a combination of top-of-the-table and the type of all round play still practised by ordinary club players.

Willie Smith cues are generally much sought after by players and collectors alike. The collector should look for one in good condition, with the original lacquer, an untouched approximately 11mm tip, and 57"-58" long. If a cue is shorter you must be confident that it has not been changed or tampered with.

Willie Smith Champion Cues

The earliest Willie Smith Champion cues were made by Burroughes & Watts and started to appear shortly after he became contracted to this firm, around 1924. These early cues were billiard shaped with an ash or maple shaft; a wide back and a flat base at the bottom. The hand-spliced butt was either ebony, stripy ebony, or rosewood, and had a square badge. The shafts and butts of later editions were made from the same woods, but were rounded at the back rather than squared off. The early cues command a price of up to £280, with the second edition ones slightly less at up to £250. These cues are very sought-after. Some people believe that only limited number were made. I personally find this hard to believe as I have seen quite a few myself. However, not many of these have been in excellent condition. If you get the chance of a Willie Smith Champion cue in good condition it is worth acquiring for this reason alone.

I have heard of, but not seen, another hand-spliced Willie Smith Champion cue with the writing on the badge read with the cue vertical, and with a thumb print at the bottom. If this is correct, it could be expected to be worth around £200.

I have also seen a round badge Willie Smith cue which carried his name and dated from the early 1920's. The badge did not appear to be of the type produced by Burroughes & Watts, but unfortunately the makers name was illegible. This had a plain machine-splice ebony butt and as it is a little rarer than the other cues, I would value it between £80-100 in very good condition.



Willie Smith, photographed in 1925.



A second edition of the Willie Smith "Champion" cue



The Willie Smith "British Record" cue

Willie Smith Record Break Cues

The Willie Smith Record Break cue was also produced by Burroughes & Watts. The badge is printed with the words "Willie Smith Record Break, Limited Edition" together with the value of the break, which would have been 2743. These cues were supposed to have been made in a limited edition of 500 although I have seen one with the number 571 stamped on the shaft. However, not all cues were numbered and as they can be quite difficult to find, you would expect to pay between £150-200 depending on condition. There may be an additional premium if you can find one with a very low number stamped on it. The "Record Break" cues are usually very good players.

There is also a Willie Smith "British Record" cue. The writing of this badge is read holding the cue vertically rather than side-on. It commemorates both of Smith's 2743 and 2030 breaks and mentions that he had made 83 breaks over 1000. The hand-spliced version of this cue has an ebony butt with a tulip front splice. I am not sure of the precise date that this cue began to be produced, but the design would suggest the 1930's. As it is known that Smith had made "only" 19 breaks over 1,000 at the end of the 1928-29 season, it would be reasonable to assume that the figure of 83 would have been achieved some time around 1932 and the cue could have started production around this date. By this time Smith was producing thousand breaks at a prolific rate, typified by a match against Sidney Smith at Manchester when he made no less than seven in a six day match.

This is quite a rare cue, I have not seen many, and only one of those in good condition. They can therefore be expected to bring a good price, usually in the region of £200-250.

All three of the cues mentioned were produced exclusively as hand-spliced models, with the exception of the "British Record" cue, which was also produced with a machine-splice. This version would also be distinguished by a satinwood or maple veneer with a red front splice and could be expected to bring between £60-80.

West Country News

Top Cue Tournament

The next amateur tournament and professional exhibition is planned for 7th May at Mill Street Social Club, Wincanton. The event will have a field of up to 24 competitors and the evening exhibition will be given by WBA Chairman, Peter Gilchrist. Further details can be obtained from Colin on 01747-860836 or Jack on 01963-33197.

Junior leads the way

Michael King may be making a name for himself as a snooker star in the Exeter Leagues, but the 15 year-old is also demonstrating his ability at billiards. Playing for Sidwell "B" he put together a break of 84, which is the highest in the Billiards Division.

Wessex Individual Billiards Championship

Preliminary games were played at The Mill Street Club, Wincanton on Sunday 9th January with four groups of four players contesting games of one hour duration in a "round-robin" format. This is the third year that this system has been used for the Wessex Championship, and it has been found to work very successfully.