

THE CUE COLLECTOR

by Andy Hunter

William J. Peall was born in St. Pancras, London on 31st December 1854, and was 98 years of age when he died in June 1952. During his long life he played a significant part in the history of the game, and for his exploits to be given justice would require the full magazine rather than a few paragraphs.

Born into the licensing trade, he was never reliant on billiards for his income and had circumstances not conspired against him, he would probably have remained an Amateur player all his life. However, in March 1880 he took part in the Burroughes & Watts tournament in which he was billed "Amateur Champion" with the intention of donating any prize money to charity. He did not actually win any prize money, but the act of playing in a professional tournament was sufficient for him to lose his amateur status and he was forced to embark on a career which would make him the greatest "spot-stroke" player the game has ever seen.

Standing just over 5ft tall, Peall was the smallest professional billiard player of his day, and quite possibly of all time. As a young man, he had received lessons from John Roberts (Senior), who sold him the cue he would use all his playing career. This was very light, weighing only 14½ oz, and was almost as long as Peall was tall!

Peall's greatest moment came in an "all-in" match of 15,000 up against Charles Dawson. Over three full sessions, on 5th & 6th November 1890, Dawson found himself a mere spectator, as Peall compiled an incredible break of 3,304. In the same match Peall also made breaks of 1,494, 1,637, 1,322, 747, 611, 587, 551, 512, half a dozen between 300-500, to say nothing of a 694 unfinished. Peall took only 49 visits, including safety misses, to score his 15,000 points giving him an average of 312. In this match he also set another record with a sequence of 184 consecutive screw-back pots into the *same pocket*.

His breaks were usually made up of several sequences at the top, and he had to recover position frequently in any significant run. His best sustained effort on the spot came in a break of 2,170 against Fed White in 1890 when he made a record run of 721 consecutive pots. During his time he set a number of records, another of which was the impressive feat of scoring 1,000 points in 44 minutes (3rd May 1884). In addition to his great break of 3,304, he made eight others over two thousand and 40 more over one thousand during the course of his career.

He was officially recognised as the Professional Champion of the "All-in" game on 9th April 1892, and was never again challenged for that title. However, on 1st October 1898 the Billiards Association effectively banned the Spot Stroke by the adoption of a rule which stated "After being pocketed from the billiard spot twice in consecutive strokes by the same player, and not in conjunction with any other score, it shall be placed on the centre spot". Essentially the same rule which is applied today. Peall was still a good player under this restriction which had seen him made a personal best break of 571, but he was never again the same force in the game.

Peall retired from the professional scene in 1903 but continued to play for pleasure for some years afterwards, regularly meeting amateurs in friendly games and for charitable causes. In later days he enjoyed playing at his Hove Club, where, at the age of 84, he made a break of 295.

The Peall Record Cue

There were several cues which carried the name of W. J. Peall, but all of these commemorate his great break of 3,304.

The earliest of these "Record break" cues has the badge set to be viewed horizontally and carries a facsimile signature. The cue has a plain ebony butt with either a maple, ash or pear shaft. I have never seen any other

wood used for the shaft, although it could also have been made in hornbeam. The badge could have been set to be viewed with the cue pointing to either the left or right. I have seen this badge made both thick and thin, using either ivory or bakelite: the latter material suggesting that it was still being made after the 1920's. The lettering could either be hand-cut or lithographed: the hand-cut versions identified by having a coarser appearance.

This cue is readily available and can be expected to appear in most collections. The value of a maple or ash shafted cue is about £150 with perhaps £200 maximum for something in very good condition. The pear shafted version is much rarer and difficult to find in good condition. The only one I have seen with a pear shaft is a Record Break cue with a horizontal badge. This would be valued at around £350. The other Peall cues that I've seen have all had a plain ebony butt with either an ash or maple shaft.

The second version of the Peall Record Break cue had the signature replaced by the words "in Nov. 1890". This can be found with badges made to be read either horizontally or vertically. This cue is generally worth a little more than the cue with the signature, roughly in the range of £160-£210. All of the badges were produced with the writing in a variety of colours, typically black, red, orange and green. All of these cues would have been manufactured by Peradon & Co; but I have seen examples which have been stamped "Burroughes & Watts" and "Ashcroft". These particular cues would have been retailed by these companies. A feature of the early "Ashcroft" cues was that the weight stamp appeared on the ebony butt rather than the more common position on the shaft just above the splice.

Perhaps the most decorative in the range is the picture badge version which would have begun production in the early part of the twentieth century. This carries a head and shoulders portrait of Peall with a facsimile signature super-imposed. I have only seen this badge with black writing. All these cues have a black ebony butt and this particular version can also be found in a "snooker cue" shape indicating that they were made into the 1930's. All the other versions are always billiard shape. The picture badge cue would be valued at approximately £250-£350.

Screw-on tips

The concept of a screw-on, or "interchangeable" tip, had been introduced a few years before Peall made his great break and it is possible that any of these cues could be fitted with such a device. Quite often these can be found with the makers initials engraved on the outer barrel of the modified ferrule. The illustration shows an early example.

In their 1889 catalogue, Burroughes & Watts advised that this type of fitting could be supplied with any new cue for an additional 5s 6d. As a good cue would cost around 10 shillings, this represented quite a significant premium. Of course, the price included a "box of refills."



William Peall, who was universally addressed as simply "W.J." throughout his career



The earliest Peall Record cue carried a facsimile signature which was later replaced by a date (above). A picture badge version was also produced in the early 1900s (below)



An early example of a screw-in tip which began to become popular in the late 1880s