

Cue games



Once a common feature of larger, late Victorian and Edwardian pubs, surviving billiards rooms (or saloons) are now rare. Even rarer is a billiards room that still has a billiards table in it, as is the case with the Grade II listed Lamb Hotel in Eccles, Manchester, opened in 1906 (*above and opposite*). Of the remainder, a few house much smaller pool tables, but the majority have been converted into bars or restaurants.

One of Britain's favourite pub games – almost as ubiquitous as darts – is pool, the latest of a long line of table-top cue games to have caught on in this country since the 16th century.

In fact, since its arrival in the late 1960s, so popular has pool proved that, with only a few exceptions in certain areas, it has eased out all its older counterparts.

Featured in this chapter, those older games are bagatelle, a 19th century game; snooker, an early 20th century craze that of course continues to be popular, but in clubs rather than pubs; and bar billiards, which arrived from France in the 1930s.

But first we must consider the oldest cue game of them all.

Or as Shakespeare's Cleopatra said to Charmian, her lady in waiting, 'Let us to billiards'.

Billiards

Of course the real Cleopatra did not play billiards. But that Shakespeare should have mentioned the game at all in a play he wrote in 1606–07 does at least confirm that it was well known in his lifetime.

Most historians agree that until at least the 15th century, billiards was played outdoors on the ground with hoops, rather like croquet, but using a mace rather than a mallet to strike the ball.

(The maces were similar to putters in modern golf.)

By Shakespeare's time billiards had evolved into a table-top indoor game. For example Mary Queen of Scots was said to have complained bitterly when her *table de billard* was confiscated shortly before her execution in 1587.

Nearly a century later in *The Compleat Gamester* Charles Cotton surmised that billiards derived from Spain (*see below*), but then later in the book wrote that 'The gentile, cleanly and most ingenious game at billiards had its first original from Italy.'

(Other historians have since veered towards France as its likely place of origin, if only because the word *billard* is French.)

In Cotton's time the object of billiards was to propel an ivory or wooden ball from the near end of the table, through a wooden hoop (the 'port' or 'pass') positioned at

the far end of the table, then work it back again to the 'king', which was a free-standing wooden pin.

The final trick was to bring the ball as near as possible to the king without knocking it over.

The table's six pockets were not targets to aim at, but 'hazzards' into which you might knock your opponent's or your own ball.

If a player toppled the king, he had to begin all over again. A player passing through the back of the hoop, rather than the front, was dubbed a 'fornicator' and had to pass 'twice through the forepart' before he could continue.

The game was 'five points by daylight', or 'three points by candlelight'.

Then, as now, the table was covered by green woollen cloth.

Cotton claimed there were 'few towns of note' that did not have 'a publick Billiard-Table'. Nor were they wanting in 'many Noble and private families in the Country, for the recreation of the mind and exercise of the body'.

But Cotton added this warning. 'Where any billiard tables are set up... swarming caterpillars' »

*Billiards from Spain at first deriv'd its name
Both an ingenious, and a cleanly Game.
One Gamester leads (the Table green as grass)
And each like Warriors strive to gain the Pass.
But in the contest, e're the Pass be won,
Hazzards are many into which they run.
Thus whilst we play on this Terrestrial Stage,
Nothing but Hazzard doth attend each age.*

from *The Compleat Gamester*,
by Charles Cotton, 1674



▲ The last of its kind at a British pub – a fully functional Edwardian billiard room, at the Grade II listed Lamb Hotel, Regent Road, Eccles, in Manchester.

Built by Holt's brewery in 1906 and designed by a Mr Newton of Hartley, Hacking & Co., the pub is a classic red brick and terracotta 'gin palace', replete with mahogany screens, Pilkington tiles, etched

glass and Jacobean-style chimney surrounds.

The billiard table, supplied by the London firm of Burroughes and Watts, is surrounded by raised banquettes, fitted with bell-pushes to summon extra drinks, and with cast iron footwarmers underneath.

This set up was not only for spectators. On the far wall is the original scoreboard (made by the

Manchester firm Raper & Son), which allows for up to ten players to join in with a once popular game called Life Pool (*see page 97*).

A mile or so to the east is an earlier Holt pub, The Grapes Hotel, on Liverpool Road, also by Newton.

Opened in 1903 this has a similar billiards room, but in its centre, quite lost in the space, is a modern pool table.