

Card Design: The Ace of Spades

The Ace of Spades tends to be highly decorated, unlike the three other aces, and has somewhere along the way acquired a special status. It was neither makers nor players of any special game that brought this about, so the story is highly unusual. It began in England in 1765 and it came about through the collection of tax. As the tax was very high – presumably intended as a deterrent to gambling – makers could be tempted to take short cuts, a temptation that ended badly for one maker, who was tried for defrauding the Tax Office at the Old Bailey and sentenced to death by hanging in 1805.

The taxation of playing cards was not new in 1765, but that year saw the introduction of a new process: makers would supply the Tax Office with paper (to match their other cards) and the Tax Office would print the Ace of Spades using engraved metal plates, a printing technology that was expensive and not widely available. The maker would then buy the printed Aces from the Tax Office – thereby paying the tax – and the cost was passed on to the customer. In order to make it more difficult to forge these Aces, a more elaborate design was made – and that is how it started. An Ace from before 1765 is shown below, together with one from around 1765.



Ace of Spades, c 1680.



Ace of Spades, c 1765.

These new Aces had other features: from 1765 they carried the Maker's name, they identified the King (George III in the card shown) and they were numbered to identify which printing plate had been used. Before this, the Maker would have appeared on the wrapper but not necessarily on the cards. The wrappers were deliberately flimsy and were thrown away and usually tore when they were opened (this prevented a wrapper being re-used, with the 'tax' being kept by the seller second time around.) The named Aces mean that we can identify the maker of any pack. Thereafter, the tax changed every 10-20 years, and the design was

changed too. In short, the Tax Office has given the modern historian a way of identifying both the maker and a rough date for all cards made after 1765. It is a rare pleasure to feel gratitude for a part of the tax system.

One card maker, Richard Harding, decided that if he printed his own Aces, he could sell the cards for the same money but not have to pay anything to the Tax Office. The problem was that card-makers had wooden blocks for printing, which simply cannot reproduce the fine detail of an engraving. In short, given one or two examples to look at, anyone can tell the difference. Suspicion was raised, as he seemed to have a thriving business but bought few Aces. Various manufacturing items were found with family and accomplices, including 2,000 forged Aces. At the time, the tax on one pack was about the same as a week's wages for a labourer, which indicates the scale of the forgery. Harding was found guilty at the Old Bailey and hanged in 1805.



Wood print forgery, c 1800.



Ace of Spades, Goodall & Son,
Maker's own design c. 1862-3.

From 1862, each Maker was once again free to design an Ace of Spades as the wrapper now showed the tax. Makers continued with elaborate designs because that was expected, and ever since, the Ace of Spades has had its own design style. The tax on playing cards was finally abolished in the UK almost another century later in July 1960, but the special status and appearance of the Ace of Spades is here to stay. ■

Paul Bostock, April 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