

# Card Design:

## Double-Ended Cards

From the earliest days until around 1850, court cards were quite naturally full, standing up, portraits of courtly figures – in English cards, Kings, Queens and Jacks. An early English example is shown in the illustration on the right. There is a problem playing



*Full Queen of Spades, before 1680*

certain games with these one-way designs: whenever you are dealt a court card upside down, you would like to turn it round to see which card it is. That is only a mild inconvenience; the real problem is that you are letting the other players know that you have a court card.

### A Leap of Imagination



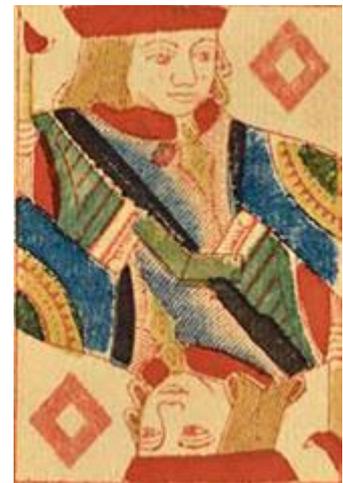
*First known double-ended pattern, by P A Keusters of Brussels 1768-89*

While our current double-ended designs may seem like common sense, it was quite a leap of imagination to think of court cards as abstract designs for playing card games rather than as pictures of real people. It is not clear who first had this idea, but the first double-ended cards still known were made by Keusters in Brussels and date from 1768-1789. While the double-ended figures have been well

thought out, because of its age the design and printing are relatively crude. We know that this innovation was not well received simply because it was not adopted anywhere else for years.

### A False Start in England

The first English double-ended set was designed by a Mr Ludlow and made by Thomas Wheeler and appeared at some time during 1801-1811. As well as the double-ended design, the suit signs were changed and unusual colours were chosen for the clothes. The four aces were also redesigned in a



*First double-ended English pack. Cards by Wheeler and Ludlow 1801-1811. Copisarow Collection*

fancy way. Card players are highly conservative – they want to recognise the cards instinctively and do not want the risk of mistaking one card for another. While Wheeler and Ludlow had a great idea, they mixed it with too many other changes. These were not a success and examples are now very scarce. It was a further forty or fifty years (starting in the 1860's) before double-ended cards were accepted in England.

### Double-Ended Becomes the Standard



While double-ended designs had been resisted in England, they became gradually more popular in Europe. So it was inevitable that sooner or later the mainstream English manufacturers would have to start making

double-ended cards. An early example is shown on the left. The double-ended pattern has been created by copying the top half of the standard full length card. This results in an awkward design – for example the King has two hands

coming from his shoulder at the top right of the card! Of course, it was not long before the makers had rationalised these designs, and from this period onwards double-ended cards are quickly accepted as the new standard.

### Mirror Images

Double-ended cards came before the invention of the corner index. As a result, there are in fact two variants, called 'unturned' (the original standard) and 'turned' (a variation in which all the suit signs are on the same side). In the original court cards, some face one way and some face the other (the direction having no

particular significance.) Traditionally, suit signs were simply located on whichever side has more space. In 'turned' courts, several of designs are mirror-images of the originals, left swapped with right, so that all the suit signs end up on the same side – see the example below. With turned court, the suit signs can be seen when the cards are fanned out. Once the cards had indices, only a decade or so later, the turning of courts was no longer necessary. In contemporary sets, turned designs are more usual, but traditional unturned patterns are also seen. ■



*Traditional 'unturned' courts. De La Rue & Co, 1862-1865*



*Newly 'turned' courts. De La Rue & Co, 1870s*

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The author is a Court Assistant in the Worshipful Company of Makers of Playing Cards – see [www.makersofplayingcards.co.uk](http://www.makersofplayingcards.co.uk). Many more sets of cards are illustrated on the author's website [www.plainbacks.com](http://www.plainbacks.com)