

ANTIQUÉ COLLECTING

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COLLECTING ANTIQUE AND VINTAGE GAMES

by Luke Honey

We live in a frenetic age: a world of computers, satellite television, demanding schedules and instant gratification. As an antidote to all of this, what could be more pleasing than a charming collection of antique and vintage games? A return to the days when families gathered around the nursery table to enjoy the deductive pleasures of Cleudo™ (invented by a Birmingham solicitor's clerk and part-time clown in 1944); the intellectual challenge of Mahjong; or the fast-paced fury of Pit, the commodities trading card game first introduced by Parker Brothers in 1904 and based on the United States Corn Exchange.

The game of chess is currently a hugely popular subject for collectors, and antique chess sets, boards, chess ephemera and rare chess books are all highly sought after. In the frantic scramble for chess, it is easy to forget that there are many other games out there,

and a select collection from this vast area would not only be unusual but also could be of considerable historic interest. Many attractive board games from the first half of the 20th century are currently extremely affordable and can be bought for under £50 on internet sites such as eBay or from specialist dealers. For collectors, the charming and brightly coloured graphics are very much part of the appeal.

The 20th century was a great period for popular board games. Improvements in both printing techniques and manufacturing spawned a plethora of new companies. Thousands of games were produced to meet the massive demand caused by an increasingly affluent middle class. And with this new affluence came leisure. And competition.

Above. Figure 1. *The Race Game*, a late Edwardian board game of 'British Manufacture'. (Author's collection)

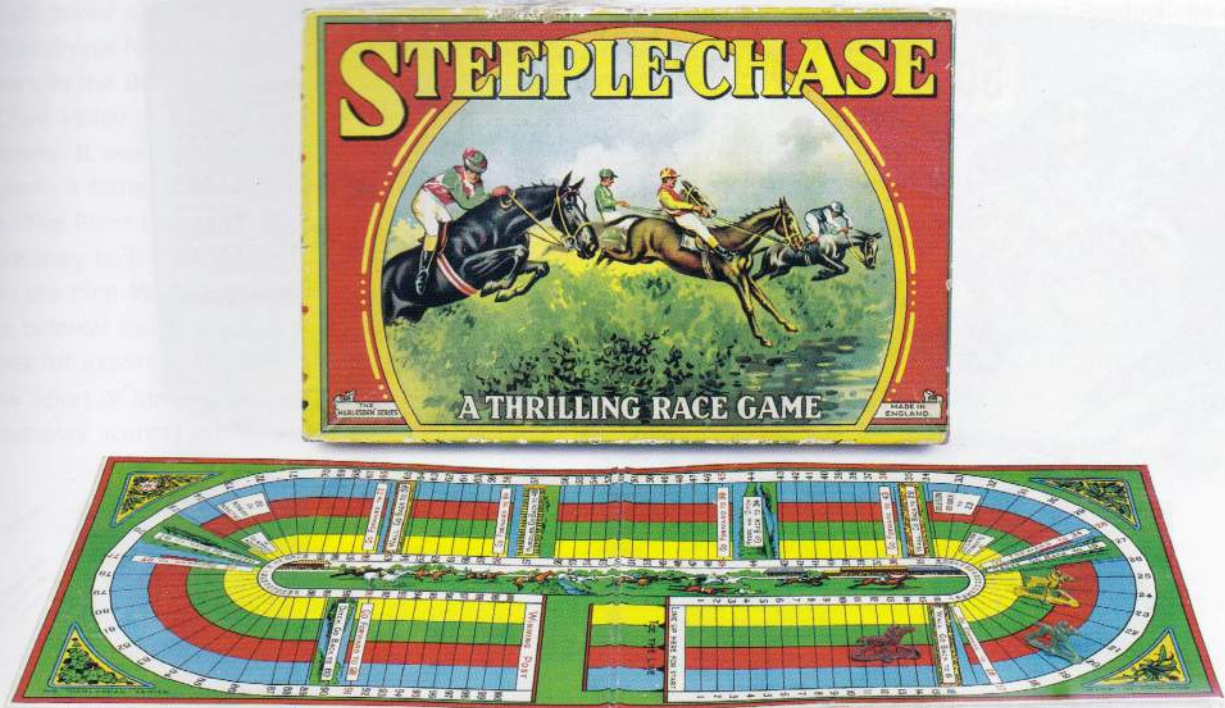


Figure 2. Steeple-chase, produced by The Harlesden Series around 1930. (Author's collection)

An original collection might be made of vintage racing board games. Of these, Totopoly™ is probably the most famous. First produced by Waddington's in 1938, Totopoly encouraged children to breed and train their racehorses on one side of the board, and then, by turning over the board to reveal the course, race their horses to the finishing post. One player would act as a bookmaker and take bets. And having played Totopoly in the formative years of one's youth, who could ever forget the evocative names of those miniature thoroughbreds: Marmaduke Jinks, King of Clubs, Priory Park or Jerome Fandor?

Escalado was created by a Swiss inventor, Arthur Gueydan, in 1928, and produced by The Chad Valley Company in the same year. The horses were placed on a tightly stretched cloth and moved forward by vibrations caused by a winding handle. The game was popular with the then Queen Elizabeth (the late Queen Mother), and a Royal Warrant was granted to Chad Valley in 1938. Chad Valley also manufactured two other similar games based on the same mechanism but featuring greyhound and speedboat racing as an alternative.

Figure 1 illustrates The Race Game, a simple, late Edwardian board game of 'British Manufacture'. The

Figure 3. Dirt-track Racing, produced by the Roberts Brothers, Gloucester (or 'Glevum Games'), 1920s. (Author's collection)

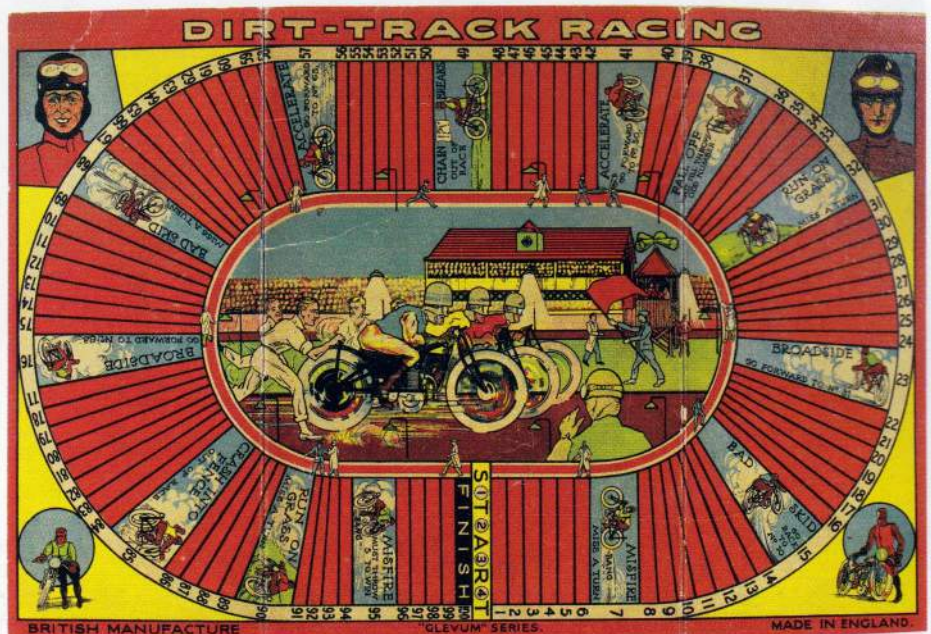




Figure 4. *The Sport of Kings*, a racing game from the 1960s made by Morton Productions of Northampton and Birmingham. (Author's collection)

'board' is made of card, folded down the middle, and printed with charming, if naive, illustrations of horses and jockeys using the chromolithographic printing process. The 'horses' are made from lead (in the manner of toy soldiers) and painted in bright colours. The die is wooden, and the cylindrical shaker made from card.

Steeple-chase (figure 2), 'A Thrilling Race Game', is a similar board game, produced by The Harlesden Series around 1930. This game was loosely based on the

Grand National; players progressed around the board by throwing dice and either moved forward or backwards when they landed on the appropriate square.

Dirt-track Racing (figure 3) was manufactured in a similar vein but featured all the excitement of the 1920s motorcycle speedway circuit. This game was produced by the Roberts Brothers of Upton Street, Gloucester, otherwise known as Glevum Games ('Glevum' being the Roman name for Gloucester). Founded in 1894, Glevum



Figure 5. Painted wooden board for *The Game of Goose* on one side and chess and a version of roulette on the other, 19th century. (Bonhams)

manufactured and sold a large range of games, toys and children's furniture, becoming one of the largest makers in the British Empire, until they were taken over by Chad Valley in 1956. Chad Valley is an interesting company. It was founded in 1897 by Josef and Albert Johnson, a father and son from the suburbs of Birmingham. The River Chad ran through the Harborne valley, where they built their factory. During the years leading up to the First World War, Chad Valley established a large colonial trade, creating 'colonial' editions of their games for export to the British Empire.

The Sport of Kings (figure 4) is an attractive (and presumably scarce) racing game from the 1960s.

Produced by the now defunct Morton Productions of Northampton and Birmingham, it was very similar in concept to Totopoly, if not considerably more complicated, and featured detailed instructions, banknotes, share certificates, veterinary surgeon's notes, race cards, auctioneers' and bookmakers' slips. This was a game for families with time on their hands.

Of course, there was nothing novel about these 20th century racing games which were, in fact, based on far earlier European board games. The Game of Goose (*Gioco dell'Oca*) is thought to be the 16th century grandfather of all race games. The first mention of it is as a gift sent by Francesco de' Medici, Grand Duke of



Figure 6. The Italian board game of Lotto Reale (Real Lottery), early 19th century, converted to a screen at a later stage. (Bonhams)



Figure 7. Pank-a-Squith, a Suffragette board game made to raise funds for the Woman's Social and Political Union and sold in the Suffragette's own shops. (Bonhams)

Florence to King Philip II of Spain. The playing surface is a track with 63 numbered playing spaces. Players place an agreed stake in the pool, and then move their pieces along the track, dictated by the throw of the dice. Many of the playing spaces were illustrated, some with a picture of a goose which meant if you landed upon it that you could move forward again by the same number you had just thrown. Figure 5 shows a charming 19th century version of the game, painted on wood, with The Game of Goose track on one side, and chess and a version of roulette on the other.

Between 1750 and 1850, a great many spiral race board games were invented, some for entertainment only, and others for teaching history, geography and divinity. In Jubilee (a game from the early 19th century), twelve sections of paper were pasted onto linen backing, forming an anti-clockwise spiral of pictures. Six players each had a coloured marker, which they advanced by spinning a teetotum – a cross between a spinning top and a die. By 1850, some bright spark had the idea of applying the world of horseracing to the spiral board game, and an oval race game called, imaginatively, The Game of Race entered the market.

Figure 6 shows an early 19th century board game called *Lotto Reale* (or Real Lottery). This was a popular Italian game of chance, and an early variant of the now widespread and highly popular Bingo. This *Lotto Reale* board was unusually large and has been converted, at some point, into a screen raised on small cabriole legs. There are 36 squares depicting birds, exotic animals, pretty girls and scenes from classical antiquity.

Not all board games were produced purely for

entertainment or gambling fun. Many were produced for educational, charitable or political causes. Pank-a-Squith (figure 7) was a Suffragette board game, manufactured in Germany in 1909, to raise funds for the Woman's Social and Political Union and sold in the Suffragette's own shops – an early example of merchandising for a political cause. This game was first advertised in the paper *Votes for Women*, and derives its name from the Suffragette, Emmeline Pankhurst, and the Prime Minister, Herbert Henry Asquith. The board was printed in the colours of the Suffragette movement: green, white and violet. There were 50 squares, the aim of the game being to move the painted lead tokens (representing figures of Suffragettes) to end at the last square, which represented universal suffrage. All sorts of nasty events could happen along the way: a visit to the Magistrate's Court, the forced feeding of hunger strikers, a spell in Holloway prison or a brush with Inspector Jarvis of the Yard. Square 16 had the notice: 'Any player landing on this space must send a penny to Suffragette Funds'. Serious stuff. And the game is scarce. An example, in excellent condition and with all the lead tokens intact, fetched £3,400 at Bonhams recently.

Backgammon, one of the oldest board games in existence, is around 5,000 years old. And Senat, a similar blocking game from Ancient Egypt, pre-dates even backgammon. Currently, backgammon boards tend not to be collected as such (backgammon counters excepted), and there could be interesting collecting opportunities in this area. A rather beautiful board is illustrated in figure 8. This is for the game of Nard,

Figure 8. A board for the game of Nard, similar to backgammon. The reverse side is for chess. Northern India, 18th century. (Bonhams)



similar to backgammon and popular in Persia, the Islamic countries and amongst Babylonian Jews. The board comes from Kashmir in Northern India and is likely to date from the 18th century. Made from wood and divided into two sections, it is painted with delicate floral motifs and cartouches in blue and gilt. The reverse side is for chess.

Pachisi, another ancient and popular game originating

in India, was invented over 1,000 years ago. Like backgammon, it requires equal measures of both luck and skill. Legend has it that the Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar, the third Mughal Emperor of India, played a form of living pachisi, using girls from his own harem. The name 'pachisi' derives from an Indian word for the number 25, which is the highest number that could be thrown with the cowrie shells used to play the game,



Figure 9. Traditional cloth and ivory and glass counters used for playing pachisi. This ancient and popular game originated in India and was the forerunner of Ludo. (Bonhams)



Figure 10. A luxury Mahjong set made for Queen Elisabeth of Greece. The carved jade tiles and four jade and gilt dice are contained in a silken box. (Bonhams)

S. A. R. la Reine Marie de Roumanie
 Certificat que le coffret d'un jeu de
 Mah Jong, composé, en jade
 de Saint Auguste (ville) sa résidence
 de la Reine Elisabeth de Grèce, Prince
 de Monaco.
 fait à Paris le jour 11 Août 1919
 26 Avenue de Messine
 # 101 de Hobart
 Prince de Roumanie

the shells being a substitute for dice. Beehive- or dome-shaped counters are used to move around the board. Figure 9 shows the traditional pachisi cross-shaped cloth and a collection of various antique pachisi counters made from ivory and glass. The coloured glass counters were made in Belgium during the late 19th century for export to India. Later, during the British Raj, a simplified variation of the game was patented in England in 1896 under the name of Ludo, the word 'ludo' being the Latin for 'I play'.

Then there is the mysterious game of Mahjong. It may surprise readers to learn that the game is not as ancient as it is often purported to be, probably dating to no earlier than the 1870s. In 1920, Joseph Park Babcock published his *Rules of Mah-Jongg* (otherwise known as *The Red Book*), the earliest version of the game in the United States. Babcock had been a representative for Standard Oil in Soochow where he had first encountered the Chinese tile game we now know as Mahjong. He reinvented a simplified version and trademarked it as Mah-Jongg, primarily with the idea of introducing it to America. His idea took off, and a frenzied Mahjong craze swept America, Europe and Japan during the 1920s. Many thousands of sets were imported from China.

The majority of old Mahjong sets which collectors are likely to come across date from this period. The boxed case will be made from a Chinese hardwood and will feature a sliding front panel with Chinese characters. The tiles will be made from bamboo mounted with cow-bone (imported from the American West) or ivorine (an

early plastic). Good examples of these sets can fetch several hundred pounds at auction. Chad Valley produced a simpler 'toy' version in a cardboard box with wooden tiles mounted with printed paper.

At the other end of the spectrum are the luxury Mahjong sets produced for an aristocratic clientele. Sets with ivory tiles may exist but the chances of finding one are remote. However, Mahjong sets with tiles fashioned from jade are known. Figure 10 shows a luxurious set made for Queen Elisabeth of Greece, a keen gambler. The set comes in a silken box, and the five drawers contain carved jade tiles and four delicate jade and gilt-heightened dice.

The world of games is a huge and seemingly inexhaustible area to explore. Although early boards for chess and backgammon are now probably out of the financial reach of most collectors, an inspiring and aesthetic collection could be built up in the field of 20th century board games, even for accumulators of limited means. And what better than the joy of rediscovering the competitive pleasures of past times, of owning that winning horse in the Grand National, or indeed, of beating your Great Aunt Agatha in a 'friendly' game of Mahjong?

All photographs by Roger Dixon.

Luke Honey is an auction consultant, writer and fine art and antiques specialist.

