

Check out the knights for a top chess set

By **TOBY WALNE**

CHESS is the oldest game of skill in the world – and one of the most collectable. It spread from India into ancient Persia in the 6th Century, but did not arrive in Britain until the 12th Century, when it was brought back by Christian knights returning from the First Crusade in Jerusalem.

Originally, four military divisions defended the monarch – the infantry, cavalry, elephants and chariots. Over time the pieces were changed to fit the British feudal system and they became pawns, knights, bishops and rooks.

It wasn't until the release of the Staunton chess set design in 1849 by sports and games maker Jaques of London that chess became known in the format we recognise today.

Bill Jones, 89, of Canvey Island, Essex, is a fifth-generation chess maker in a trade begun by his family in the mid 19th Century. His father, Bertram, made sets that were sought after by collectors. Bertram sets that sold for £20 a couple of decades ago now fetch up to £3,000.

'Chess is not just a game – it is a form of art,' says Bill. 'There are six designs on a chessboard for the 32 pieces. A great craftsman can bring these objects to life.'

'The First World War wiped out the majority of skilled craftsmen who made chess pieces. This helps to explain why most collectable chess sets were produced more than 100 years ago.'

'Ivory sets tend to be the most sought after because they are strong and exquisitely carved. Bone can deteriorate when dirt gets in its pores, while plastic is less appealing. Wooden sets tend to be less valuable, unless exceptional.'

Collectable chess sets can also be made from pottery, precious metals and glass.

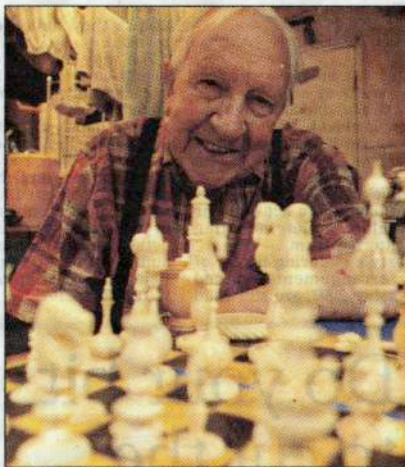
The ban on ivory trading does not affect antique sets, says Bill. It is possible to repair chess pieces using properly certified old ivory.

'Although ivory is durable it can still break,' he says. 'I winced when I see a chess set violently upturned in a film or TV scene – the horse's ears on a knight tend to be the first bits to get broken.'

Luke Honey, chess consultant for auction house Bonhams, in central London, says knights are the most important figures to scrutinise when assessing a set. Their shape means that they cannot be turned by machine, but require a skilled craftsman.

A carved chess set should also be judged by the quality of the pawns. A master carver usually focused on the king and queen, and the knights, bishops and rooks were made by experienced workers.

Pawns were often polished off by apprentices. Therefore, if you come



FAMILY TRADITION: Master craftsman Bill Jones

across a superbly made pawn it indicates that the master carver may have completed the whole set.

Luke says: 'One of the great attractions of chess is there is such a variety of styles and ages from which to choose. Always go for the rarest and finest carved pieces you can afford, making sure to do your homework before buying.'

He believes that 19th Century chess sets are a great place to start collecting. Popular patterns such as Washington, the Edinburgh Upright, Calvert and Dublin are all available from £500 if complete and in good condition.

The Staunton chess sets are ideal for modern players because they are so recognisable. They were named after the 19th Century English chess pioneer Howard Staunton and start at about £300 but can sell for more than £2,000 in top condition.

Luke says: 'There are also some wonderful ornate sets from India, China and Russia, where camels often replace the bishops and the rooks are elephants or ships.'

Historic themes and figures such as the Napoleonic Wars also sell well. Intricate 19th Century John Company ivory chess sets, made by the East India Company, sometimes depict Indians fighting the British and can fetch £20,000 or more. A couple of decades ago they changed hands for £5,000.

Luke says: 'Most collectable chess sets were made in

the 19th Century when the game exploded in popularity. Earlier sets tend to be scarcer so they are even more valuable. It is unusual to find anything made before the 17th Century.'

The top price paid for a chess piece was £828,750. That was for a single ivory king made in Egypt or Syria for a Muslim 10th Century chess set. It was sold in 2000, having been bought the previous year at auction for £1,000.

'Lewis Chessmen' from about 1150 were discovered on the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides in 1831. The 93 walrus and whale ivory pieces are priceless – 11 are held in the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh and 82 in the British Museum in London.

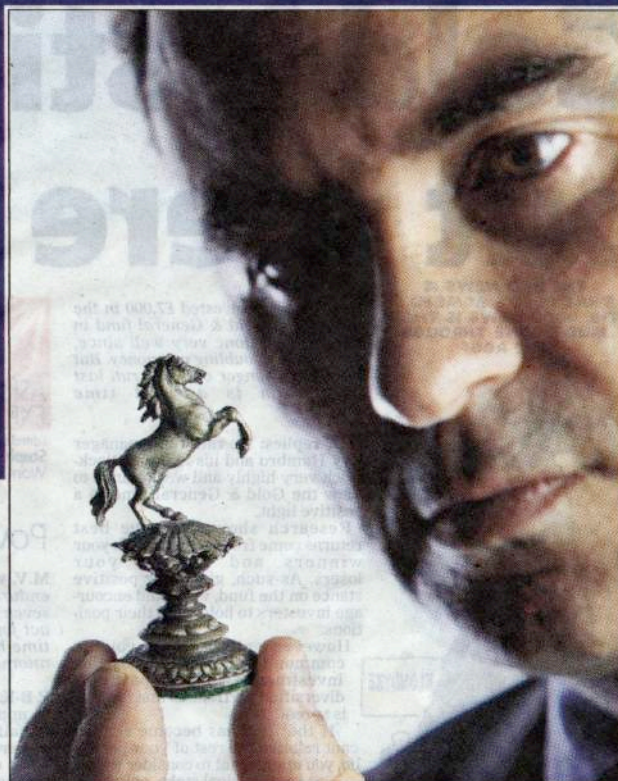
As with all chess sets, having all the pieces and the original box is ideal. However, particularly fine and rare sets that include sympathetic replacements are still highly collectable and valuable.

It is important to handle a set before buying. Sets with missing pieces are worth far less, so check for bad forgeries that feel sharper to the touch than smoother pieces handled through years of playing.

Chessboards tended to be sold separately, but old examples are also valuable. Antique ivory Indian boards can sell for £2,000, while Staunton boards can fetch more than £500.

► Chess Collectors International, chesscollectors.com; Guide books include *Master Pieces* by Gareth Williams; *Bill Jones's Notes From The Turning Shop*; Auction house chess specialist Bonhams, 020 7447 7447, bonhams.com.

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EXPERT ADVICE: Luke Honey, chess and games consultant at auctioneer Bonhams

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