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Cards and Gambling

People have gambled for as long as they have had a hope of winning and anything to lose – and, life being a risky business, many of the gambler’s turns of phrase have worked their way into everyday language.



*Well, I never knew that . . .
 . . . the spades on cards aren't for digging*

Cards have been used for fortune telling for centuries, especially tarot decks with cards bearing names such as Death, Good Fortune, etc. Hence the expression meaning that something is bound to happen: ON THE CARDS or IN THE CARDS.

There are several astrological links between tarot cards and modern playing cards. The four suits of tarot cards and their meanings have evolved over time. These have included overt male and female sexual symbolism, royalty and magic. By the Middle Ages they represented four elements of society: Knights, the Church, Peasants and Merchants.

Knights were a vital part of medieval society, and were initially represented in tarot cards by swords – which in turn, as phallic symbols, represented males – and named after the Italian word for sword, *spada*. In France, knights were increasingly associated with spears and lances, and so the

sword blade became the shape of the point of a long spear or pike. In England this shape, together with a misunderstanding of the word *spada*, led to the symbol becoming more like a shovel/spade shape. Hence we called the suit SPADES. In Italy and in tarot cards across Europe the symbol of the suit is still traditionally a sword.

Another suit was originally represented by cups or chalices, representing the curvy female figure in shape and, as a receptacle, complementing the male spade. Over time this suit evolved into a more overtly feminine image representing love in its widest sense, including the church and the love of God. We know it as HEARTS.

Originally representing the royal sceptre, the symbol of the third suit shifted from a royal mace of authority to a military mace and then to a cudgel. In Italy it is called *batas*, meaning a club. The Latin word *batas* is closely related to our words 'bat', 'beat' and 'batter'. By the time the suit reached France, it had reverted back towards a royal mace topped with a trefoil or *fleur de lis* – the symbol of the French kings. By the time it

reached England, the trefoil had been interpreted as a clover leaf and hence this suit came to represent the farmers who brought in the crops and looked after livestock, often associated with clover. However, we adopted the *meaning* of the Italian name for the suit (*batas*) giving us the term CLUBS.

Originally representing coins, the fourth symbol evolved into a pentacle (a five-sided star within a circle) signifying gods, magic and the wealth that they could bestow. The symbol evolved again to a more overtly wealth-related symbol that also came to represent the merchant class within society: DIAMONDS.

The classic pictures of kings on playing cards are stylized representations of four real kings, all of them considered role models in one sense or another. The first king is depicted with the giant sword of Goliath, whom he slew when a shepherd boy, and a harp which he is famous for playing: he is DAVID, KING OF ISRAEL. The second is depicted with clothes adorned with stars, because he wore such clothes during his ten-year campaign across the Middle East: he is ALEXANDER THE GREAT.

The third 'king' is always shown in profile, as he was on coins that were distributed throughout the empire he created, although technically he was never a king or an emperor. He is JULIUS CAESAR. The fourth is the King of the Franks and Holy Roman Emperor, always depicted carrying the handle of the sword as protector of the heart of Christ and the Holy Roman Empire: he is King Charles the Great: in Latin, Carolus Magnus, better known to us as CHARLEMAGNE. Incidentally, the queen cards have represented different historical queens and characters from the Bible, but the detail varies from country to country and through the ages.

The English word for cards with the value of two has evolved from Old French *dues* as DEUCE. Similarly, cards with the value of three are called TREYS from *tres*.

*Well, I never knew that . . .
 . . . if you play against a sharp it probably won't be
 worth the candle*

Before the days of gas or electric light, some people playing cards would employ boys to hold candles behind them so

they could see their cards properly. This is because candles on the table would cast shadows and would often make it more difficult to read the cards they held. At the end of the evening they would need to pay the boy and for the price of the candle itself. If they had not won money that evening, it would have NOT BEEN WORTH THE CANDLE OR NOT WORTH A LIGHT.

During the 16th century the word 'envy' began to be used in the sense of challenging another gambler to accept a bet, in the sense that if they won, others would be envious of them. Over time the word was shortened and came to be used to refer to any challenge between two parties: VIE.

Also in the 16th century, in an attempt both to reduce gambling and to raise money for the Treasury, a tax of two shillings and sixpence was applied to every pack of playing cards. This was equivalent to what many people would earn in a week. Because the tax was so high, it was paid only when the cards were actually sold, when the 'tax paid' sign would be stamped on one of the cards. This was done by making one ace symbol much bigger than normal and leaving the centre

unprinted so the stamp could be applied. The card traditionally used was THE ACE OF SPADES. When the tax was stopped the printers did not want to change the style and so made use of the space by printing their own details in it. This is why the printer's details often appear on the ace of spades.

'Sharp' was an old word meaning alert and clever, with the implication of taking advantage of other, slower people. Hence when someone is sailing too close to the wind for most people's morals we say he is engaging in SHARP PRACTICE, and someone who cheats at cards is a CARD SHARP. This has sometimes been misheard or reinterpreted as CARD SHARK.



*Well, I never knew that . . .
 . . . if you've got a Yarborough you can come up trumps
 without any trumps!*

In many card games you need to play a card that is the same suit as that of the first card played: FOLLOW SUIT.

One card game, originally called triumph, evolved through several names, including whisk, due to the flamboyant way that some players would pick up with a flourish the cards they had won. Confusion with another word meaning 'hush' led to the name by which we know the game today: WHIST (from 'whisht', meaning 'hush'). Meanwhile, the earlier name gave us one of the phrases used within the game: TO TRUMP (meaning to triumph). Trump cards, that is, cards from the suit selected as 'trumps' for that round, beat any non-trump card and so are highly prized. Hence, by analogy of being dealt such a card, receiving good fortune or achieving a good outcome is called COMING UP TRUMPS.

In the 18th century Edmond Hoyle wrote a book detailing the then rules of whist. It proved very popular, as there had been

several variations of the rules up to that time. He then published other books on other games, all of which came to be accepted as the definitive rules. An expression subsequently emerged meaning that something is the correct interpretation of the rules: ACCORDING TO HOYLE.

Lord Yarborough was a very keen bridge player and an active gambler. He used to offer anyone odds of 1,000 to 1 that they would not be dealt a hand with no trumps. From this such a hand is called A YARBOROUGH.

If you suspect someone is trying to look at your cards, you may be tempted to hold them up against your body to prevent him or her seeing them. This has given us a phrase for being guarded and reticent about anything: KEEPING YOUR CARDS CLOSE TO YOUR CHEST.



When all cards have been dealt in whist or bridge each player has 13 cards, which is just about as many as anyone can hold comfortably in one hand. When all cards have been played and they are then dealt out again it is therefore called a new HAND.

'Having a game in their hand' is an expression that referred to a player having been dealt exceptionally good cards, so that he could see that he would easily win the game. This has now evolved into A GAME IN HAND, meaning he can see a further victory ahead of him. From the same source we get an even shorter expression meaning that a situation is under control: IN HAND.

Another phrase for being in control of a situation derives from a player ending up with every one of the key cards in the game: he is then said to be HOLDING ALL THE CARDS.

In bridge, spades is the highest-ranking and highest-scoring suit, and so whatever value of cards you have, spades will be the preferred suit. Hence an expression for being in a strong

position or having an ample helping of a quality or advantage: TO HAVE IT IN SPADES.

Several sports have taken a phrase from bridge which is used when one team has won all 13 tricks in a hand and jubilantly bangs the last winning card down on the table. It means winning everything that can be won: a GRAND SLAM.

Well, I never knew that . . .

. . . you've got to chip in if you want to hit the jackpot

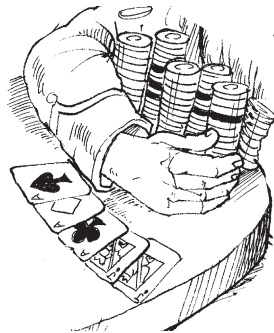
From the Latin *caspa*, meaning 'a box', *casa* became the Italian word for a house. Thus the North African port where most of the houses were white was called CASABLANCA. From illegal gambling carried out secretly in a small box-room hidden within a house we get the diminutive of *casa*, CASINO. The French word for a wheel is *roue*. And so one of the casino games which is based around a small, spinning wheel is called ROULETTE.

Roulette tables have four very popular betting areas, each of which pays back the original stake plus the same amount

again. Two are the colours red and black, usually labelled in French, *rouge* and *noir*. The other two use the Latin-derived terms for even: PAIR (from *par*, meaning equal) and the term for odd, the opposite of pair: IMPAIR.

In early card games, coins that were being bet were literally put into a central bowl, and the winner would then take all its contents. Hence the term THE POT.

In an early variant of poker a special 'pot' of money was gradually increased through the game until a player had a pair of *jacks*. He could then claim this money even if he did not win the hand. Hence the phrase has become associated with winning a lot of 'bonus' money not associated with skill: HIT THE JACKPOT.



The idea of having to put a couple of coins into the pot before being able to participate also gives us the phrase used in discussion when seeking permission to contribute or participate: 'CAN I PUT MY TWO PENNYWORTH IN?' or, in the States, 'CAN I PUT MY TWO BITS/CENTS IN?'

Incidentally, the US term 'two bits', meaning 25 cents, has an interesting derivation. Back in medieval England, coins were made of precious metals and were actually worth their face value. Therefore a shilling coin could be cut into quarters and each quarter would be worth three pennies. As they were pieces of a larger coin, they were called threepenny BITS (of a shilling). The UK retained this term for coins with straight edges right up to the 1960s. The US dollar coin was actually based upon a Spanish coin that was worth eight *real* (a Spanish unit of currency). These coins are best known by the pirate term PIECES OF EIGHT. In theory one of these coins could be cut into eight pieces, each worth one *real* or 12.5 cents. However, 25 cents was much easier to work with; hence the term TWO BITS, meaning a quarter of a dollar.

In the game of blackjack a player can, in theory at least, get the odds in his favour by counting how many picture cards have been played and how many low-value cards have been played. The significance of this is that if there are more picture cards than low-value cards still to play, there is more chance of the dealer losing each hand. This technique, which is banned in most casinos, is called **COUNTING**, and a gambler suspected of using this trick will often be asked to leave.

Professional gamblers have come up with all sorts of theories to beat casinos. Some have succeeded, whether by spotting a fault with a roulette wheel that means that some numbers come up more frequently than they should, or 'counting' the cards at blackjack, or using hidden electronic devices to enable covert teams to get the odds into their favour. The idea of trying to make money from casinos has led to a phrase that nowadays is used to describe people who make money through acting as some form of middle-man or big business deal-maker. Originally, though, it referred to the two most popular activities in casinos, roulette and cards: **WHEELER DEALERS**.

Two phrases meaning it is time to give up come from gambling. You do not gamble with cash in casinos; you buy chips at the start of the evening and then, at the end of the evening, you convert whatever chips you have back into cash: **CASH IN YOUR CHIPS**. If you have spent your money and used up all your tokens you have **HAD YOUR CHIPS**.

In poker and other betting games it is usually necessary in casinos for players to put chips into a central pot in order to play; thus contributing to a central pot or resource of any kind is called **CHIPPING IN**.

When a casino gambler places a bet he puts his betting tokens (chips) onto the table. For example, in roulette he places them on the number he believes will win. Having placed his chips he is not allowed to move them again. From this we get the phrase meaning that an irreversible commitment has been made regarding a risky situation and that there is great anticipation to see the outcome: **THE CHIPS ARE DOWN**.

In a casino, if you bet everything you will often push a whole

pile of chips into play, leaving no reserve. You do so by pushing the bottom of the pile and hence are BETTING YOUR BOTTOM DOLLAR.

During the great depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s there were few people who were in a position to use the highest-denomination betting tokens, which were usually coloured blue. Those people who could were clearly extremely wealthy and secure in their financial situation, despite the worry and uncertainty in the economy. A small number of large companies were also seen as very well run, with solid financial backing and good prospects for the future. These companies became known as BLUE-CHIP COMPANIES.

Well, I never knew that . . .

. . . you can bet money or meat – it's the same word

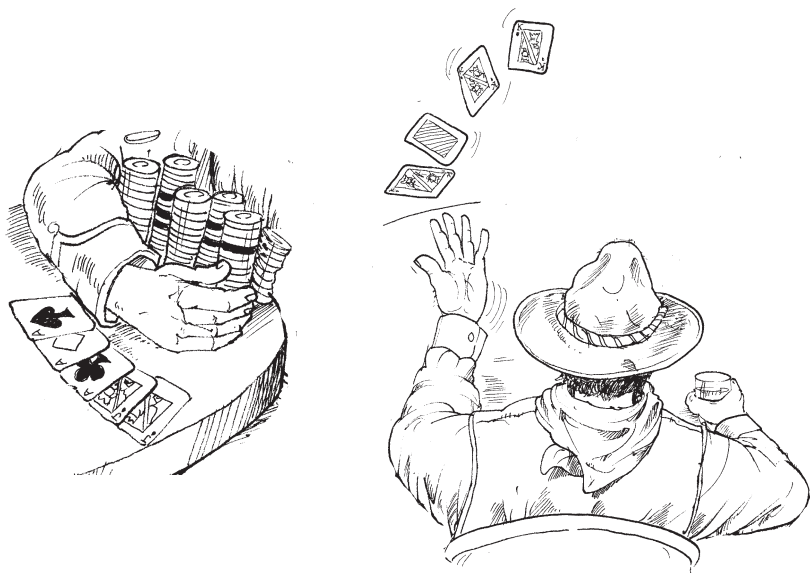
The ancient word *steg* meaning 'to pierce' led to our word for a piece of wood that could be used to pierce something: a STICK. It also gave us the word for a piece of meat that could be cooked by being pierced with a stick and held over a fire:

STEAK. A large 'stick' could also be STUCK in the ground and used as a pole, giving us the word STAKE. Short stakes would often be set up at temporary markets where people would finalize details of trading deals or bets. The cash involved would be placed in a dish on top of these pieces of wood. Hence the term for money being bet: STAKE. In permanent markets these stakes would be made of metal, and because of their resemblance in shape to giant nails they were called NAILS. Deals done here would require cash payment immediately. Hence the phrase PAY ON THE NAIL.

Incidentally, because small, sharpened sticks were used to 'pin' two documents together, we get the verb TO STICK things together. When adhesives became available to glue things together, we kept the same word, even though sticks are no longer involved!

At the end of betting in the game of poker, despite whatever bluffing has been going on, in order to beat someone else's cards you need to declare what cards you actually have. This gives us a phrase now used more widely to mean showing

your true resources or intentions: **SHOWING YOUR HAND**. Alternatively, if you believe that you will inevitably be beaten, instead of showing your hand you give up and **THROW IN YOUR HAND**.



If you want to keep the betting going during a game of poker it is necessary to raise the stake by at least one more coin. Hence the phrase **TO GO ONE BETTER**.

The Latin word meaning 'in front' is used in poker and other games where a player needs to provide money up front in order to play or stay in the game. The word is **ANTE**. If a player is very confident or wishes to intimidate someone else out of the game he can increase the amount of money necessary to stay in the game: **UP THE ANTE**. Incidentally, the same word is used in Italian restaurants to describe the course that precedes the main pasta course: **ANTIPASTA**.

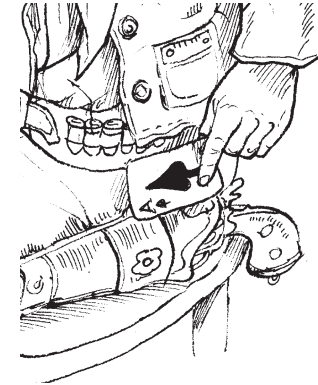
Medieval fairground games would sometimes have a hen as a prize. From the French name for a hen (*poule*) we get the word for a prize in betting games, especially card games: the **POOL**. When such a pool is won, the winner will sometimes sweep his winnings to his side of the table in a dramatic way, giving rise to the phrase nowadays used more widely to mean having won everything: **SWEEPING THE BOARD**. A related phrase is used to describe betting among a group of friends who agree that one of them will end up with the entire pot of all the stakes bid: **SWEEPSTAKE**.



In early US gambling houses there was usually a slot or 'hole' in the table, into which the dealer would slip money which then fell through into a locked drawer. To get the first card dealt each player would have to pay a certain amount. This first card was played face down, because you had paid money to be in the game. It was called THE HOLE CARD, an expression in America nowadays meaning something secret. Clearly, the higher this card is the better, hence the expression meaning

having something important in reserve: having an ACE IN THE HOLE. Equally, if a gambler was allowed credit by the gambling house he would be said to be IN THE HOLE – meaning owing someone money, probably more than he could really afford.

When playing cards one should always keep one's cards in clear view of everyone else. If one's hands go out of sight under the table it is considered UNDERHAND. Rather, they should be kept above the table or ABOVE BOARD.



In poker, the dealer would often have a knife on the table in front of him to make it clear who was dealing. In the Wild

West these knives would often have handles made from the horn of a buck (deer). When it was time to pass on the responsibility of being the dealer to the next player, the retiring dealer would literally *PASS THE BUCK*. When American President Harry S. Truman wanted to demonstrate his leadership and responsibility he famously said ‘*THE BUCK STOPS HERE*’. Sometimes a silver dollar would be used as a marker, and through this association we get the slang term for a dollar: *A BUCK*.



At the end of the 19th century a carpenter in Lancashire developed a local game also called ‘buck’ into a very popular pub game. It came to real prominence in 1908 when a pub landlord was accused of letting people play a game of chance in his pub – which was not allowed. By soundly beating a court official at the game in the courtroom he proved that it was in fact a game of skill! Ever since it has remained a very popular pub game, and has hardly changed – except for its name. We call it *DARTS*.

During the 15th and 16th centuries people would bet on almost anything, so if a situation arose in a game where it was considered that both parties had a roughly equal chance of winning, bets would be offered between the players and observers where the odds were ‘divided equally’ – in Latin, *iu parti*. This phrase began to be used in Britain to describe an uncertain outcome and, increasingly through the 17th century, a situation of risk and then potential danger. In parallel the letter ‘i’ evolved into two forms, one remaining ‘i’ the other lengthening its stalk and becoming a new letter: ‘j’. This is exactly what happened to the ‘i’ at the front of *iu parti*,

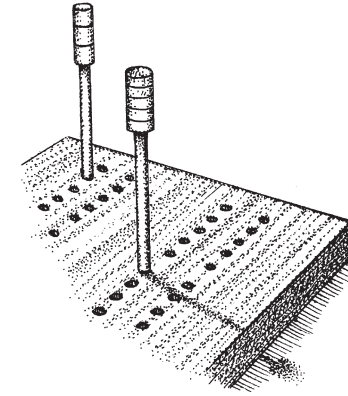
which became *ju parti* and eventually evolved into our word JEOPARDY.

*Well, I never knew that . . .
 . . . if you get left in the lurch it will be a long time
 before you peg out*

The card game of cribbage used to be very popular in Britain in the 19th century. In this game you record your scores by moving small wooden or ivory pegs around the board. You win by getting your counting peg all the way off the board and out of the playing area. You then stop playing. This has given us the phrase meaning to be finished or to die: TO PEG OUT.

In cribbage, ‘lurch’ is the word used to describe the situation when one player is so far behind that it is most unlikely that he can win – for example, if one player has scored 51 points and the other player has not even reached the first corner of the board. This gives us the expression TO BE LEFT IN THE LURCH, meaning being in a very disadvantageous position from which one is unlikely to recover. When two players have the

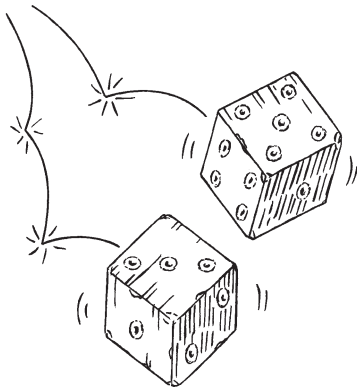
same score this will be obvious by the positioning of their counting pegs; hence LEVEL PEGGING.



When playing dice it does not take long to have one or even two goes. Hence the expression ‘I WILL BE FINISHED IN A COUPLE OF SHAKES’.

During the long and boring siege of a Saracen fortress called Hasart, 12th-century crusaders adopted a local dice game. The Arabic word for chance was *alzahr*, and the two words were combined to name the dice game. The crusaders brought the game back to the UK, where it became very popular until

eventually the government banned it from London because whole fortunes were being bet, won and lost through it. The name of the game evolved into a word that then became strongly associated with high-risk outcomes: HAZARD (from Hasart and *alzahr*).



A form of raffle is named after the *tumbling* motion of slips of paper in a rotating box that ensures a random selection: TOMBOLA.

Scores in many games, especially in pubs, would often be recorded by chalking them on the ground or wall. The higher

the score, the more chalk marks. If you won with a lot more chalk marks you would be said to WIN BY A LONG CHALK.

In the early 19th century a book was written that told how an Irishman bet that he could create a new word and get it used by the whole population of Dublin within 24 hours. That night he had four letters written up all over the city. It was very similar to the Latin words *qui es*, meaning 'Who is it?' The next day everyone was saying the word to see if anyone knew what it meant – so he won the bet! The word has subsequently been used for asking questions, initially about what something means, but nowadays on a wider basis, as in pub competitions and on television shows. The letters were Q-U-I-Z, and the new word was QUIZ. This is also the origin of this series of books. See page 000 for more information!