

BILLIARDS THE SPORT OF OFFICERS

William Harde

Billiard Rooms in the forts.

By the late 1890s most, if not all of the Royal Navy's shore establishments and the regimental institutes of the Army contained recreational facilities for the men including bagatelle tables and billiard tables, for billiards was enjoyed by officers and men alike.

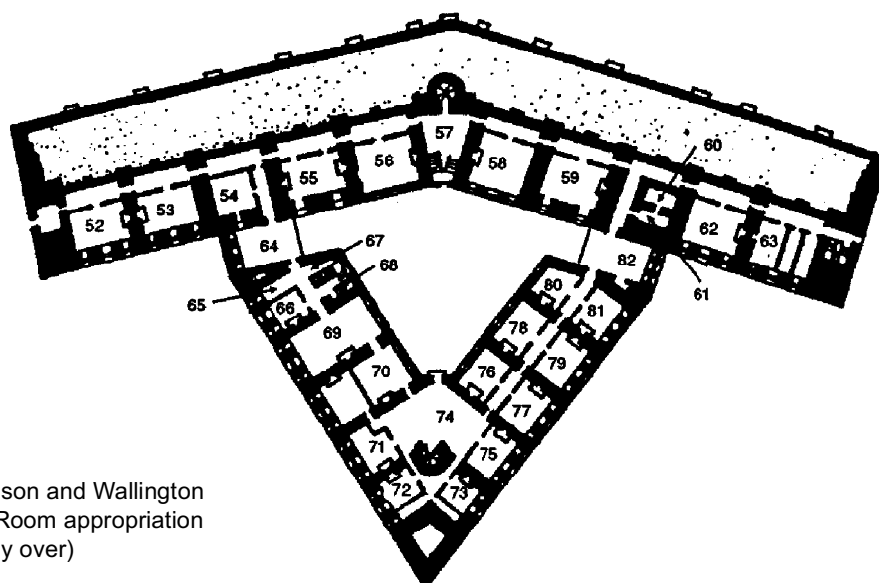
Sometime after 1889 the five forts of the Portsdown Hill defence line all contained a billiard room for the recreational use of the officers. The billiard room at Fort Nelson was on the upper west side of the redan, next to the officers mess ante room. It is designated as a billiard room on the 1913 room appropriation plan but does not appear as such in the appropriation plan of 1873 or 1889 when it was used as a quarters for two officer's servants. This refutes the suggestion that the forts were constructed with billiard rooms. The earlier plans also show the ante room divided into two rooms, hence the need for a second doorway between it and the later billiard room.

The layout of, the redan and barrack block at Fort Wallington was identical to the one at Nelson. Fort Purbrook, al-

though similar, had the officer's mess ante room, and presumably the later billiard room, on the ground floor, with the kitchen above. Which room served as the billiard room in Forts Widley and Southwick is not shown on the earlier plans.¹ The officers' mess at Forts Brockhurst, Grange and Rowner was extremely large in comparison with those in the Portsdown forts. The adjacent billiard room seems to have been the earlier ante room, a smaller quarter having been re-appropriated for use as an ante room.²

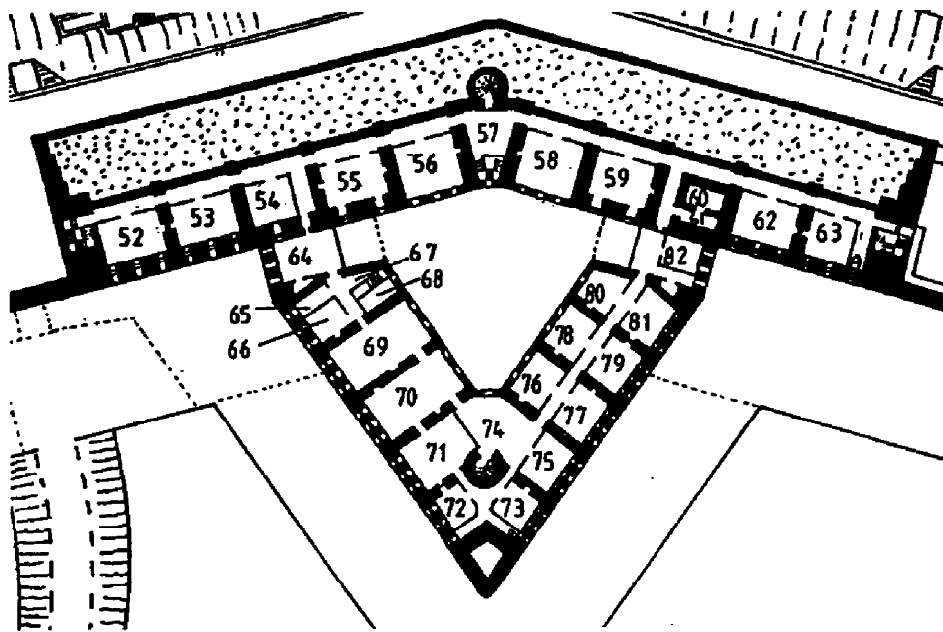
The 1872 Revised Schedule of Barrack Furniture lists that required for Officers' Billiard Rooms viz

*Bellows - 1 where turf or wood is used as fuel Boards, inventory - 1
Corticine (to cover floor around table) - 16 - 3ft wide
Fenders, officers' - 1 to each grate
Lamps for billiard table - 6 if required
where gas is supplied Pokers officers' - 1 to each grate
Scuttles, copper, coal - 1 to each grate
Shades for billiard lights - 1 to each lamp
or gaslight over the table Shovels, fire, officers' - 1 to each grate
Table, billiard, for home or foreign service, complete with appurtenances as under. - (allowed only under W O.
Authority as funds are available, and subject to the conditions contained in the Regulations for Billiard Tables)*



Forts Nelson and Wallington
Original Room appropriation
1873 (Key over)

Plan of Redan at Fort Nelson showing Room Appropriation in 1889 taken form 'Room designations in the redan and Barrack Block at Fort Nelson 1860 to 1913' by David Moore



1873

- 52 Sergeant's Quarters no.4
- 53. Sergeant's Quarters no.3
- 54. Store
- 55. Sergeant's Quarters no.1 & 2
- 56. Orderley Room
- 57. Landing
- 58. No.2 F.O. Qtrs no.2.
- 59 No.2 F.O. Qtrs no.1.
- 60. Expense magazine
- 61. Lobby
- 62. No.1 F.O. Qtrs no.2.

- 63. No.1 F.O. Qtrs no.1.
- 64. Landing & W.C.
- 65. Plate Store
- 66. Mess Waiter
- 67. Closet
- 68. Stair
- 69. Mess Room
- 70. Ante Room
- 71. Officer's Servant's no.3 & 4.
- 72. Officer's Servant's no.7 & 2.
- 73. Officer's Servant's no.5 & 6.
- 74. ---

- 75. Officer's Qtr. No.5
- 76. Officer's Qtr. No.3
- 77. Officer's Qtr. No.4
- 78. Officer's Qtr. No.1
- 79. Officer's Qtr. No.2
- 80. F.O.s servant No.1
- 81. Officer's Qtr. No.6
- 82. Landing & W.C.

Appropriation dated 1889

- 52 & 53 Married Qtr. No7a
- 54 Store
- 55 Sergeants' Mess Kitchen
- 56 Sergeants' Mess
- 58 School Room
- 59 Single Sergeants'

60-82 No change

Appropriation dated 1913

- 52 - 54 Married Qtr. No7a
- 55 Sergeants' Mess Kitchen
- 56 Sergeants' Mess
- 58 School Room
- 59 Single Sergeants' No.1
- 60 Cartridge Store (barrack)
- 61 Shifting Lobby
- 62 Field Officer 2
- 63 Field Officer 1
- 64 ----
- 65 Plate Store

- 66 Mess waiter
- 67
- 68 Stair
- 69 mess Room
- 70 Ante Room
- 71 Billiard room
- 72 Officer's Servant's no.2 & 5.
- 73 Officer's Servant's no.3 & 4.
- 74. ----
- 75 Officer's Qtr. No.2
- 76 Officer's Qtr. No.4
- 77 Officer's Qtr. No.5

- 78 Officer's Qtr. No.3
- 79 Officer's Qtr. No.1
- 80 Officer's servant No.1
- 81 F.O.'s Servant No. 1
- 82 Group Store

1926

- 52 - 54 Spare
- 62. Office
- 63. Rest Room

<i>Appurtenances</i>		
Balls, billiard set (consisting of 3)		1
Board marking	1	
Brush, cloth	1	
Cover, table, Holland		1
Cues	billiard	12
	butt	1
	half	1
	long	1
Funnel, tin		1
Iron, billiard,	with shoe for smoothing cloth	1
Pool	balls set (consisting of 12)	1
	basket	1
	Board	1
	Rules framed	1
	Till	1
Pyramids.	balls, set (consisting of 16)	1
	rest	1
	rules framed	1
	triangle	1
Rack to hold	18 cues butts and rests	1
	Rests cushion	1
	long	1
	short	1
Rules, framed. billiard		1
Warmers	cushion	6
	pocket	3
Tongs, fire, officers' - 1 to each grate		

Issues under this schedule will only be made where the rooms have appropriated under W. O. Authority.

When Nelson was first built the billiard room was used as a quarter for two officer's servants. At this time there was no door through to the Officers' Ante Room. Some time after 1889 and by 1913 the room was re-appropriated for use as a Billiard Room.

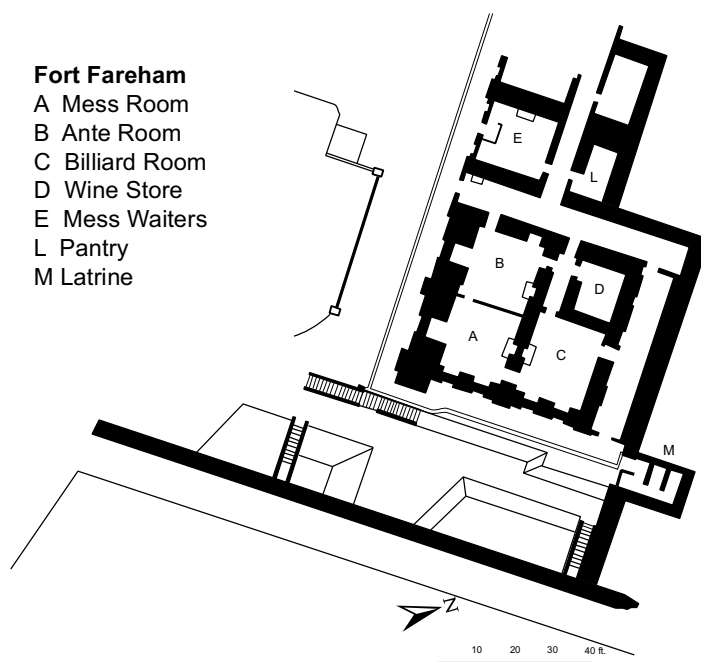
A partition was added and the wall cut away around the curve of the spiral stair to allow access past the partition to the Officer's servants quarters in the point of the redan. A door was added to allow access to and from the Ante Room.

The room at Fort Nelson contained one table. This may have been a Thurston, al-though there were other manufacturers, such as George Edwards.

The balls were of ivory or crystalate. The table was lit by overhead oil lamps as Nelson was not connected to a gas supply. These were fitted with a special shade, rectangular in plan, to throw the light down onto the table. It was not until 1913 that electric lights for domestic use and billiard halls were possible following the invention of the gas filled lamp. A scoring and marking board with dials or sliders for keeping the score would have been fixed to the wall. The cues would have also been stored in racks on the walls, standing on their butt ends. The games played On the table would have been pyramids and life pool. Black Pool and finally Snooker were later introduced as the game became popular amongst the officers of the regiments returning from India. No doubt money changed hands, particularly during the game of Life Pool

A full size billiard table measured twelve feet by six, and in the room at least five feet clear all round was essential to allow for the length of the cues. In Fort Fareham, the last of the Portsmouth land forts to be completed, the billiard room was situated in the officers mess in the north angle of the fort. It appears on the 1913 plans of the fort. This room had plaster covered walls, as did all rooms for the use of

Fort Fareham
A Mess Room
B Ante Room
C Billiard Room
D Wine Store
E Mess Waiters
L Pantry
M Latrine



officers, and, no doubt so that a full size table could be accommodated, a purpose built recess running around the sides of the room so that the cue could be drawn back into it without fouling the wall

The game

The earliest origins of billiards is obscure but Charles Cotton writing in 1674 attributes the game to Spain or Italy. The term billiard is derived from the French 'billart', one of the wooden sticks, or bille', a ball. Billiards was originally played outdoors on the ground. Some suggest that croquet is a form of outdoor billiards. When billiards was moved indoors it was played on a wooden table with green cloth to resemble grass and a simple border around the edge to prevent the balls falling off. The first indoor tables had no pockets. The game consisted of hazards. A winning hazard scored one point when the player struck his cue ball and caused his opponents ball to pass through a hoop or pass. A losing hazard was when the player caused his ball to strike his opponents and then rebound off it through the hoop. The game was concluded when the winner reached the agreed total of three, five or seven points up and then by causing the player's ball to rebound from the opponents ball and strike the king post or peg. The red ball

The third red ball was introduced by the French during the eighteen century, when the pass and post were omitted. The game then consisted entirely of cannons when the cue ball was struck and hit each of the the other two balls in succession scoring one point. This game is still played in France. Some evidence suggests that the French first added pockets as hazards when they discarded the pass and post, but they were also discarded. The English game developed when the red ball was introduced from France in the late eighteenth century. Pockets were added. With three balls on the table cannons scored two points and in addition both winning hazards (now called 'pots') and losing hazards (now called in 'offs') were played into the pockets instead of through the pass. Potting or going in off the opponents white ball scored two points and the same strokes using the red scored three. The various strokes combined allowed range of sixteen different strokes . Around the beginning of the twentieth century the game of billiards became popular in ordinary clubs, hotels and billiard halls.

Pyramids

The game of pyramids requires fifteen red balls and the white cue ball. The red balls were set up in the form of a triangle with the apex of the pyramid on the pyramid spot. One point was scored for each red potted until all fifteen were pocketed.

Life Pool

Life pool was played by up to twelve players. No points were scored. Each player drew a coloured ball by chance out of a bottle shaped pool basket. If less than twelve players were playing then the number of coloured balls was reduced accordingly. There was no black ball.



J. W. SMART, BILLIARD TABLE MANUFACTURER
 15, College Green, BRISTOL.
 Awarded Gold Medal of Merit for Excellence at Licensed Victuallers' Exhibition, March, 1897.
 Sole Agent for Bonzoline Billiard Balls; £1 11s. 6d. per Set, 2 1-16th.
CUES, TIPS, CHALK AND EVERY REQUISITE FOR THE GAME IN STOCK.



Each player made a stake of money and started with three lives, losing one each time his ball was pocketed. on the loss of his third life he was out of the game unless he made a further stake by electing to 'star'. It was possible to star for a second or third time and then the player was finally out of the game. The winner was the player who remained and he took the stake money.

Black Pool seems to have been the game of pyramids with a black ball added.

Snooker

The origin of snooker is well documented. Neville Chamberlain a young subaltern whilst playing during the monsoon season of 1875 in Jubblepore suggested that to vary the game of black pool another coloured ball from the life pool set be placed on the table, to which other pool balls with different values allotted to them were gradually added. At first the positions and values of the balls were varied until finally in 1882 a committee meeting of interested officers took place at Ootacmund following which the rules of 'Snooker' were established. Sir Neville Chamberlain writes that the game of Snooker originated during the time that he travelled all over India on

the staff of Field Marshall Earl Roberts. They were constantly asked how to play . As everybody knew how to play pyramids they simply showed how the coloured balls were added from the life pool sets and described the simple rules decided at Ootacmund. The game spread across the military stations and was brought back to England when officers and complete regiments returned home on leave. It is accepted that the game was first played at the Woolwich Arsenal and for some time it was believed that it originated at the Woolwich military establishment. The Billiards Association recognised the official rules to the game in 1900. The first professional snooker championship was held in 1927.

The table

Early billiard tables were made of wood without pockets and with a plain edging to stop the balls falling to the floor. The first tables with pockets were made in the late seventeenth century. The king post disappeared about this time. During the early nineteenth century billiards became very popular amongst the Royal Family but there were no specialist billiard table makers. A Billiard table was ordered from a cabinet maker.

The table in Queen Victoria's Osborne House was manufactured by Magnus and decorated with frieze panels designed by Prince Albert, made by Thurston. John Thurston specialised in making billiard tables from 1814. His tables had wood beds and stuffed cushions. From 1826 he introduced the slate bed. In 1835 he introduced rubber cushions. These were prone to lose their resilience in cold weather, becoming hard and almost unplayable. To overcome this six cushion warmers, pans filled with hot water, were provided. These were the length of the cushion and shaped to accordingly, with filling holes at each end. They were placed against the cushions to warm them before a game. The invention of vulcanised rubber which retained most of its resilience in cold weather led to Thurston patenting improved rubber 'frost proof' cushions in 1845. The cloth of the table needed ironing to keep it as smooth as possible and special irons were provided. These had a slug which was heated in the fire and then placed inside the base of the iron. Thurston supplied billiard tables to the Royal household and held the warrant of Queen Victoria from 1837. He died in 1850 but his successors continued his work. The Billiards Association was formed in 1885 to establish and control the rules of play. In 1892 a Thurston table was selected as the standard which has been specified in the rules ever since.

Billiard cues In the first games a mace was used to strike the ball using an end with a flat or face. In addition a stoke could be used to propel the ball in the required direction. Later the shaft became longer so that it was held over the player's shoulder instead of in front. Because of this the head had to be slightly angled and a sighting line was marked on the upper surface of the mace. During the second half of the eighteenth century the player could use the wrong end or handle of the mace shaft to strike the ball. The handle of the mace was known as the 'queue' or tail from which we get 'cue'. Many strokes were made easier by this and the cue was

introduced, the mace losing favour. Women were not allowed to use the cue end as they tended to rip the table with the sharper cue! In 1807 a French infantry officer called Mingaud added a leather tip to the cue, overcoming miscueing. The use of either end of the cue is the reason for the chamfer which can still be found on modern cues. In 1885 the Billiards Association stipulated that the tip must be used to strike the ball. Rests now became necessary. Around 1825 a man called Bartley first demonstrated the use of a special 'twisting' chalk applied to the tip to allow striking the ball off centre. By 1830 the application of 'side' or 'twist' was widely used.

Billiard Balls

The earliest billiard balls were made of wood. Later ones were of ivory. In the early twentieth century there were at least four billiard firms trading in London. The firm of Burroughs and Watts alone required the slaughter of well over one thousand elephants per year to supply the orders for billiard balls. In 1890 750 tons of elephant tusks were imported into London for making billiard balls. More would have arrived through other ports such as Liverpool. It has been estimated that to supply Britain with ivory balls required the slaughter of twelve thousand elephants in one year. Luckily snooker was not yet popular. Ivory shrinks in dry conditions and swells in damp so the balls were never perfectly spherical. Fortunately in 1868 John Wesley Hyatt of Albany, New York State developed a substitute for ivory. It was the very first man-made plastic to be marketed. It was made of cellulose nitrate and camphor loaded with finely ground animal bones and compressed and cured into a solid mass before grinding and turning to shape. Hyatt formed the Albany ball company in 1869 and manufacture his Bonzoline balls. In 1900 one of Hyatts workers, George Birt came to England and made similar balls here. These were marketed as Crystalate balls but it took a long time for these balls to be accepted by the top players.

Notes

1. For plans showing room appropriation in the Portsdown Forts refer to those in 'Fort Nelson and the Portsdown Forts' by Garry Mitchell
2. For plans showing the officers' mess and room appropriation in Fort Brockhurst refer to 'Fort Brockhurst and the Gomer-Elson Forts' by David Moore.

Sources

Shire Album No. 136 - Billiards and Snooker Bygones by Norman Clare
Navy and Army Illustrated 1898, 1899
A Brief History of the Noble Game of Billiards - Mike Shamos 1995 - Curator of the Billiard Archive - The Internet
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Fort Fareham A Brief History and Description - D. Moore - The Redan no. 8



Billiard Room Fort Fareham



Billiard Room Fort Nelson