

Vintage Billiard & Cue Tools

By Neil Searle

While there are a few conflicting theories as to when billiards was invented, most agree that it was created in France during the 15th century. In essence, the game was named by the French, but it was influenced by an older game played by the Knights of the Templar. The term “billiards” is believed to have originated from a French word “billart,” which means “mace” or “cue stick, in fact the earlier games were called Mace, where the balls were shoved rather than struck. Also, the French word, “Bille” meaning Ball seems to provide the first syllable of the word Billiards.

There are numerous specialist tools that have been used over the years for building and maintaining billiard tables and cues. I have in my collection a couple of bifurcated fork wrenches that fit a brace, this tool is also referred to as a pool table rail bolt tool.



Fig.1. Two Fork Wrenches.

I have removed the housing from the fork wrench on the left. This adjustment using a screwdriver is to set the distance to match the Rail Bolts. The right hand turnscrew is made by William Gilpin, Wedges Mills, (Formed 1763) Sheffield, UK. To fit a specific size Rail Bolt.



Fig. 2. These are three different types of billiard table bits. All three are adjustable. The one on the right is French in origin.



Fig.3. Bifurcated turn screw, Rail bolts.



Fig. 4. Brunswick Billiards Co. Fork Wrench with a Rail bolt shown alongside. Stamped BB within a circle. This was made by Brunswick, established in 1845, was the world's premium pool table brand, known for exceedingly high quality tables. Early on, the company was known as Brunswick-Balke-Collender of Detroit, Michigan.

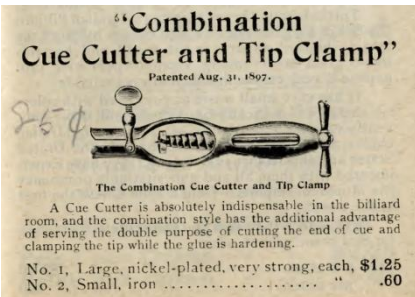


Fig. 5. Antique Brunswick Balke Collender- Pool Cue Tipping Tool c1880s. These were used to hold the billiard cue in place while preparing the cue for a new tip by scraping away the old glues.

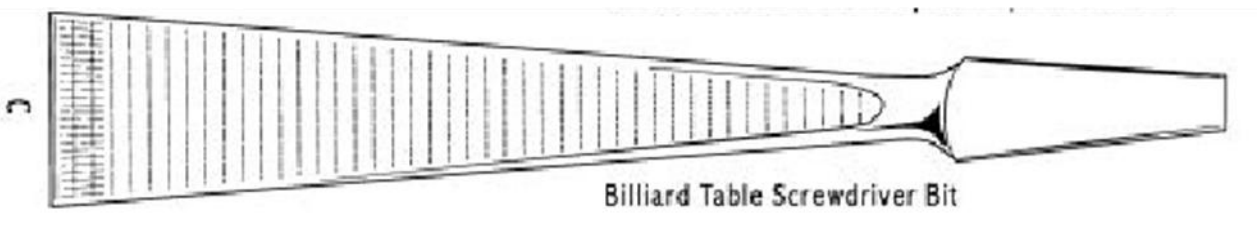


Fig.6. Billiard Table turn screw bit to fit a brace. A specialized bit used in Great Britain was the billiard table screwdriver bit. These tightened large slotted screws used in the assembly of the billiard tables. Note that they are quite spatulate in shape with the blade margins converging to the tang with almost no shank evident. These bits are rare and seldom found.



Fig. 7. TAYLOR TENONING MACHINE CO. ROCKFORD ILL. Pool Cue Tenon Cutting Machine from 1911 is for cutting the tenon on pool cues. When the ferrule gets worn out, this machine cuts the old one off and prepares the tenon for a new ferrule. Simply, adjust the set screw for the desired diameter and then pull the blade in and shave off the excess.

US Patent: 991,668 May 09, 1911. *"The object of this invention is to form tenons on billiard cues to receive the ivory ends to which the leather tips are connected."*

Henry O. Taylor residing at Rockford, in the county of Winnebago and State of Illinois.



Fig. 8. Old tools for attaching rails to billiard tables. These would have been used by traveling pool table mechanics or in pool rooms with large numbers of tables. Used on round head rail bolts with two holes in the top. Custom wrench made by blacksmith (top), round adapter for hex-head wrench (center) and old "fork bits" of various widths for use with carpenter's brace.

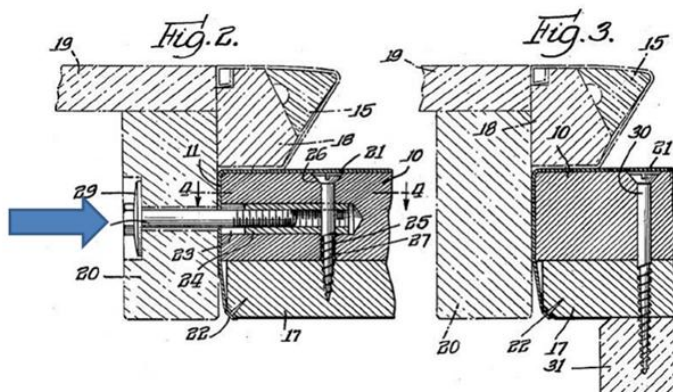


Fig.9 A rail bolt indicated by the arrow in the cross-section. Specialized Cabinet Makers that made billiard tables were known as Framework Makers.



Fig. 10. Big Billiard Cue Machine Co. St. Paul, Minnesota. Patent No. 1107483. Aug. 18, 1914 by Martin Bohlig, St. Paul, Minnesota. *“My invention relates to improvements in tenon cutters and is particularly, though not exclusively, adapted for cutting tenons on billiard cues and the like”* The ferrule cutter will take shaft tips between 6.5mm and 10.4mm in diameter. This is a very simple to use tool which lets you cut the cue neatly ready to take a ferrule. Normally ferrules are fitted by the use of a lathe. In this case, this handy tool enables you to quickly prepare a cue without the need for expensive machinery which means it can be completed at home.



Fig. 11. Billiard Rail bolt wrench.
1890s rosewood handle



Fig. 12. Michael Phelan, the father of American billiards, emigrated from Ireland and in 1850 wrote the first American book on the game. He was a tireless promoter of the game and created the manufacturing company of Phelan and Collender. In 1884 the company merged with its chief competitor, J.M. Brunswick & Balke, to form the Brunswick-Balke-Collender Company, which tightly controlled all aspects of the game until the 1950's. Its successor, Brunswick Billiards, is still the largest American manufacturer.



Fig. 13. Billiard/Snooker Table Level, 64 ½ " in length. Made by I. & D. Smallwood Makers, Leopold Street, Birmingham. Established in 1810. Smallwood also made much shorter levels for leveling Pool tables and when you consider the perfectly flat slate bed, a short level should be all that is necessary.



Fig. 14 & 15. A closer look at the level as shown in Fig. 13. The long rosewood implement with brass attachments. With, inch, foot and millimeter measurements. Obviously shaped ends to fit the cushions on the billiard/snooker table.



Fig. 16. Billiard table level by Preston with its own wooden storage case.

Many companies manufactured levels specifically for leveling billiard tables, although I think so named to produce more sales.



Fig. 17. Billiard cue tip tool. Wood and brass with a file on the end of the chain.

One influential figure often credited with advancing the game significantly was Jean Noble (also known as John Napier). A Scottish mathematician, inventor, and physicist in the late 16th century, Napier revolutionized billiards by introducing cue sticks with leather tips.

The earliest table beds were constructed of an interlaced structure of wood that then had to be planed to a flat surface, this process was called 'Flogging the bed'. Later various materials were used including cast iron, slate, concrete and even float glass. For a limited time Brunstone was used which is a fine-grained sandstone.

Ref: Brunswickbilliards.com. Dr. James Price. Wikipedia. eBay. Various Billiard Companies.