

Norman Clare Collection, EA Clare & Son Ltd., Liverpool

Ivory billiard ball 1890s

Football was not the only sport enjoyed by Mary Queen of Scots (see *page 20*). She also liked a game of billiards, complaining bitterly when the table was removed before her execution in 1587. Mary's balls would have been wooden. But in the following century, a new material emerged.

Unlike wood, ivory balls did not bruise. They were denser and also made a satisfying click when struck. And though rarely completely spherical, and prone to expand in the heat, they were the best a man could get for nigh on 200 years.



Billiards from Spain at first deriv'd its name

Both an ingenious and cleanly game

One Gamester leads (the Table green as grass)

And each like Warriors try to gain the Pass

But in the contest e're the Pass be won

Hazards are many into which they run

The Complete Gamester, Charles Cotton, 1674

Ivory from female elephants was apparently the most suitable, each tusk yielding four to five balls. In 1911 *Billiard Monthly* reported that the London firm, Burroughes & Watts, required 1,140 elephants annually to meet orders. And they supplied perhaps a sixth of the total market.

Fearing that supplies would run out, as early as 1869 a New York manufacturer offered \$10,000 to anyone finding an alternative. Duly inspired, an inventor in nearby Albany came up trumps. Experimenting with various formulae for celluloid, John Wesley Hyatt's first synthetic attempts, as we read earlier, tended to explode when clattered together. But eventually he perfected the mix, marketing the new balls under the tradename 'Bonzoline' in USA and 'Crystalate' in Britain.

Seen here is an ivory set made for the game of Pyramid, a precursor of snooker, made by the London firm, Thurstons, in the 1890s. That spot in the centre, by the way, is not painted. It is the nerve that ran through the centre of the tusk.



Diameter 5.25cm

Weight 144g

