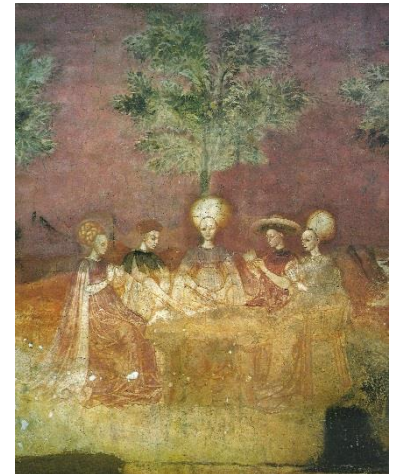


## De La Rue Living Timeline

### 2 Playing Cards: Certain Improvements (1831-1855)

*"No other game was ever so generally played by people of both sexes - young, old, rich, and poor. It is, perhaps, as extensively diffused as the use of tobacco, and is certainly indulged in by a greater variety of persons." - William Chatto, Facts and Speculations about Playing Cards, 1848*

Cards have a long and sometimes uncertain history. They probably originated in China, then spread through the Islamic world to Europe. Certainly they were established in England by 1463, when Edward IV banned their importation. As the years progressed the games changed and cards went in and out of fashion, but they were generally a part of the entertainment landscape.



### Thomas's Patent

Thomas, having set up with his two partners as "Card Makers, Hot Pressers, and Enamellers", began to put his years of experimentation in enamelling, colouring, and printing to good use. In 1831, he registered his first Ace of Spades with Somerset House, a momentous occasion, as one could not manufacture playing cards without a license from the House (which enabled a one-shilling tax to be imposed on every deck).



However, Thomas did not just want to make cards, he wanted to improve them. He submitted his first patent in 1831: **certain improvements in making, or manufacturing, and ornamenting playing cards**. It was granted and sealed in 1832 in the form of a Royal Letters Patent from William IV.

This patent was a momentous occasion in the history of De La Rue, of playing cards as a whole, and to some extent, English colour printing! There were many 'improvements' detailed in the patent, such as creating better quality oil colours, enamelling the cards, and better colour printing.

Before Thomas's patent, cards were generally printed on flimsy card with woodblocks, and coloured in with watercolours mixed with paste through a stencil. Naturally, many of these cards were poor quality.

His instructions to remedy these problems were incredibly detailed, reading almost like a dedicated recipe book in some areas

*"Take one gallon of old linseed oil (the older the better) and boil it very slowly for three of four hours in an iron pot or vessel, occasionally igniting it and stirring during the whole process with an iron ladle. In some instances I find it necessary to dip a few slices of stale bread just prior to ebulation taking place which facilitates the operation... When cold it should be the consistency of very thick treacle."*

Monochrome lithography had been around for some time, but converting the process into multiple colours (chromolithography) was troubling printers across the continent. In particular, they faced the problem of getting the colours in register, i.e. ensuring the colours neither overlapped nor left ugly white gaps. Thomas solved this problem through his 'Ring', which involved cutting steel into the exact shape of the card to ensure that the lithographic stones did not move around. Interestingly, the patent for chromolithography was only given out in 1837, to Godfroy Engelmann Mulhouse. Some have therefore pointed out Thomas's crucial place not just as an improver of playing cards, but as an ahead-of-his-time pioneer of colour printing!

Thomas continued to improve his production processes through innovation, registering numerous more patents. His new manufacturing methods drew the attention of journalists: in 1842 *Bradshaw's Journal* wrote that

*"The whole of the Messrs. De La Rue's establishment is carried on in a manner perfectly unique. Steam power, wherever practicable, is applied to the various departments of business..."*



## Designs

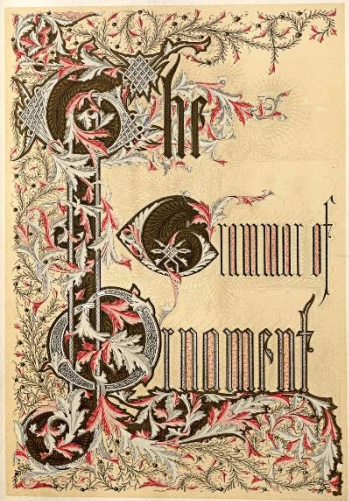
Thomas not only improved the process of making playing cards, he enhanced the designs. Firstly he attempted to put some life into the faces of the court cards, and even tried giving the Queens some feet!

Unfortunately for Thomas, the arbiter of taste in playing cards was a lady called Mrs Battle, whose opinions were recorded in *Mrs Battle's Opinions on Whist* by writer Charles Lamb. Lamb himself tried to persuade her that

Thomas's innovations were worth supporting: "Man is not a creature of pure reason - he must have his senses delightfully appealed too". However Thomas was compelled to back down as Mrs Battle could not see the utility in new faces!



Luckily for the future of playing cards, Thomas turned them over. Until the nineteenth century, cards had had plain backs, which often showed up marks, ruining the game for experienced players. Thomas decided not only to colour the backs, but to hire designers to do so. One commentator wrote that:



*"Mr De La Rue's idea had been to excite and cultivate the public taste. In these more elegant forms of printing, formerly in England few or no manufacturers thought of going to the expense of employing designers."*

His most fruitful design collaboration was with the architect and artist Owen Jones. They worked together for 20 years, in which time Jones produced 173 playing card backs, cementing a house style for De La Rue which reflected his own enthusiasm for Islamic and world-wide architectural design, as expressed in his most famous work *The Grammar of Ornament*.

## New Opportunities

These much-lauded improvements in quality opened new opportunities for Thomas, ones that took the company into its first international venture. In Russia, playing cards were only produced by the Tsar, with all profits *officially* going to the Foundling Hospital. However they struggled to produce enough cards to entertain the population, as playing cards were incredibly popular.

Thomas sent his younger brother Paul to the Imperial Court. Paul began improving production, and facilitated the Russian purchase of machinery, inks, and paper from De La Rue in London. Within four years, he had quadrupled card production, and the Tsarist plant produced four million packs a year - the largest playing card factory in the world! De La Rue was officially trading internationally.

De La Rue soon discovered that playing cards could lead to easy production of all kinds of cards. For example he soon started making calling cards (much the norm at the time) with his enamelled paper, which proved to be very fashionable. Another brand new opportunity for Thomas was railway tickets! Trains were a rapidly expanding industry in the early nineteenth century, and De La Rue received their first order for tickets in 1841. By 1846 they were producing a million and a half tickets weekly, enough for nearly all the establishments in the country!

The response to De La Rue's playing cards which assured his presence as a household name, came from one of the most celebrated British authors of all time - Charles Dickens. In 1853 he wrote a piece in *Household Words* entitled "A Pack of Cards", in which he described the De La Rue factory in detail. He was particularly impressed with the designs on the backs of the cards by Owen Jones: *"each card back forms a dainty little picture, worthy of being regarded as such, irrespective of the main purpose of the card"*. The attention Thomas received for his genuine improvements to playing card quality earned him the title "the Father of the English Playing Card."

Dickens also describes the special set of cards which De La Rue printed in four different pip colours to help partially-sighted people to distinguish between the suits better. He was not the only one to praise this measure - it was also remarked upon by the jurors at the Great Exhibition of 1851 - *which we will be investigating next time!*

