What Is Whist - Origins and Legends
Etymology and Experts

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WHIST, a game at cards. The etymology of the name is disputed. Possibly it is of imitative origin, from "whist" (Hist! Hush! Silence!). "It is called Whist from the silence that must be observed in the play" (Cotton, Compleat Gamester).

In the 16th century a card game called triumph or trump was commonly played in England. A game called *trionfi* is mentioned as early as 1526, and *triumphus Hispanicus* in 1541. *La triomphe* occurs in the list of games played by Gargantua (Rabelais, first half of 16th century). In Giovanni Florio's Worlde of Wordes (1598) *trionfo* is defined as "the play called trump or ruff."

It is probable that the game referred to by the writers quoted is *la triomphe* of the early editions of the Academie des jeux. It is important to note that this game, called by Charles Cotton "*French ruff*," is similar to *ecarte*. English "*ruff-and-honours*," also described by Cotton, is similar to whist. If we admit that ruff and trump are convertible terms, of which there is scarcely a doubt, the game of trump was the precursor of whist.

A purely English origin may, therefore, be claimed for trump (not la triomphe). No record is known to exist of the invention of this game, nor of the mode of its growth into ruff-and-honours, and finally into whist. The earliest reference to trump in English is believed to occur in a sermon by Latimer, "On the Card," preached at Cambridge, in Advent, about the year 1529. He says, "The game that we play at shall be the triumph. . . . Now turn up your trump, . . . and cast your trump, your heart, on this card." In Gammer Gurton's Needle (1575) Dame Chat says, "We be fast set at trumpe." Eliot (Fruits for the French, 1593) calls trump "a verie common ale-house game." Richard Price or Rice (Invective against Vices, 1579) observes that "renouncing the trompe and comming in againe" (i.e. revoking intentionally) is a common sharper's trick.

Cotton in his Compleat Gamester says, "He that can by craft overlook his adversary's game hath a great advantage." Thomas Dekker (Berman of London, 1608) speaks of the deceits practised at "tromp and such like games." . Trump also occurs in Antony and Cleopatra (written about 1607), with other punning allusions to card-playing: "She, Eros, has Packed cards with Caesar, and false-played my glory unto an enemy's triumph."—Act iv.

Ruff-and-honours, if not the same game as trump, was probably the same with the addition of a score for the four highest cards of the trump suit. A description of the game is first met with in The Compleat Gamester (1674) by Cotton.

He states that ruff-and honours (alias slamm) and whist are games very commonly known in England. It was played by four players, paired as partners, and it was compulsory to follow suit when able. The cards ranked as at whist, and honours were scored as now. Twelve cards were dealt to each player, four being left in the stock. The top card of the stock was turned up for trumps. The holder of the ace of trumps was allowed to ruff, i.e. to take in the stock and to put out four cards from his hand. The game was played nine up; and at the point of eight honours could be called, as at long whist. Cotton adds that at whist there was no stock. The deuces were put out and the bottom card was turned up for trumps.

It is believed that the earliest mention of whist is by Taylor, the Water Poet (Motto, 1621). He spells the word "whisk." The earliest known use of the present spelling is in Hudibras, the Second Part (spurious), 1663. The word is afterwards spelt indifferently whisk or whist for about half a century.

Cotton (1674) spells it both ways. Richard Seymour (Court Gamester, 1734) has "whist, vulgarly called whisk." While whist was undergoing this change of name, there was associated with it the additional title of swabbers (probably allied to sweep, or sweep-stakes). Fielding (History of Mr Jonathan Wild) says that whisk-and-swabbers was "the game then [1682] in chief vogue." Francis Grose (Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue, 1785) states that swabbers are "the ace of hearts, knave of clubs, ace and deuce of trumps at whist." The true function of the swabbers is not positively known; it is probable that the holders of these cards were entitled to receive a certain stake from the other players.

Swabbers dropped out of general use during the 18th century. The points of the game rose from nine to ten ("nine in all," Cotton, 1725; "ten in all," Seymour, 1734, "rectified according to the present standard of play"). Simultaneously with this alteration, or closely following it, the entire pack of fifty-two cards was used, the deuces being no longer discarded. This improvement introduces the odd trick, an element of great importance in modern whist. Early in the 18th century whist was not a fashionable game. The Hon. Dames Barrington (Archaeologia, vol. viii.) says it was the game of the servants' hall. Contemporary writers refer to it in a disparaging way, as being only fit for hunting men and country squires, and not for fine ladies or people of quality. According to Barrington, whist was first played on scientific principles by a party of gentlemen who frequented the Crown Coffee House in Bedford Row, London, about 1728.

They laid down the following rules: "Lead from the strong suit; study your partner's hand; and attend to the score." Shortly afterwards the celebrated Edmond Hoyle (q.v.) published his Short Treatise (1742). It has been surmised by some that Hoyle belonged to the Crown Coffee House party. This, however, is only a conjecture. There is abundant evidence to show that, in the middle of the 18th century, whist was regularly played at the coffee houses of London and in fashionable society. From the time of Hoyle the game continued to increase in public estimation, until the introduction of bridge, which has to a large extent replaced it, but which has much in common with it.

It will be of interest to mark the successive stages through which whist passed from the time of Cotton. The only suggestions as to play in Cotton are that, "though you have but mean cards in your own hand, yet you may play them so suitable to those in your partner's hand that he may either trump them or play the best of that suit "; also that "you ought to have a special eye to what cards are play'd out, that you may know by that means either what to play if you lead or how to trump securely and advantagiously." It appears from this that the main ideas were to make trumps by ruffing, to make winning cards, and to watch the fall of the cards with these objects.

In the rules laid down by the Crown Coffee House school a distinct advance is to be noticed. Their first rule, "Lead from the strong suit," shows a sound knowledge of the game. Their second rule, "Study your partner's hand," though sound, is rather vague. Their third rule, "Attend to the score," if amended into "Play to the score;" is most valuable.

From the Crown Coffee House school to Hoyle is rather a wide jump; but there is no intervening record. Hoyle in his Short Treatise endorses and illustrates the "Crown" rules. He also brought the doctrine of probabilities to bear on the game, and gave a number of cases which show a remarkable insight into the play.

About 1770 was published William Payne's Maxims for Playing the Game of Whist. The advance in this book is decided, as it inculcates the rules of leading invariably from five trumps and the return of the highest card from three held originally. Matthews's Advice to the Young Whist-Player (anon., 1804) repeats the "maxims of the old school," with "observations on those he thinks erroneous " and "with several new ones," but some of the maxims which he thinks erroneous are now generally allowed to be correct.

Soon after Matthews wrote the points of the game were cut down from ten (long whist) to five (short whist). Clay's account of this change is that, about the beginning of the 19th century, Lord Peterborough having lost a large sum of money, the players pro-posed to make the game five up, in order to give the loser a chance of recovering his loss.

The new game, short whist, was found to be so lively that it soon became general, and eventually superseded the long game. "Coelebs" (Laws and Practice of Whist, 1851), who mainly repeats former writers, only calls for mention because he first printed in his second edition (1856) an explanation of the call for trumps. Calling for trumps was first recognized as part of the game by the players at Graham's Club about 1840.

Long whist may be said to have died about 1835. The new game necessarily caused a change in the style of play, as recorded by James Clay in The Laws of Short Whist, and a Treatise on the Game (1864).

Whist then travelled, and about 183o some of the best French whist-players, with Deschapelles at their head, modified and improved the old-fashioned system. They were but little influenced by the traditions of long whist, and were not content merely to imitate the English. The French game was the scorn and horror of the old school, who vehemently condemned its rash trump leads; those who adopted the practice of the new school were found to be winning players.

Dr William Pole (Philosophy of Whist, 1883) remarks that the long experience of adepts had led to the introduction of many improvements in detail since the time of Hoyle, but that nothing had been done to reduce the various rules of the game to a systematic form until between 185o and 186o, when a knot of young men proceeded to a thorough investigation of whist, and in 1862 Henry Jones, one of the members of this "little whist school," brought out a work, under the pseudonym of "Cavendish" which "gave for the first time the rules which constitute the art of whist-playing according to the most' modern form of the game."

The little school was first brought prominently into notice by an article on whist in the Quarterly Review of January. Whist had previously been treated as though the "art" of the game depended on the practice of a number of arbitrary conventions. But it was now shown that all rules of whist-play depend upon and are referable to general principles. Hence, as soon as these general principles were stated, and the reasons for their adoption were argued, players began to discuss and to propose innovations on the previously established rules of play.

A further development was the introduction of the system of discarding from the best protected suit instead of from the weakest, when the adversaries have the command in trumps. Soon after this (1872) followed the "echo" of the call for trumps, and contemporaneously with the echo the lead of the penultimate card from suits of five cards or more, not including the ace, a lead that was so vigorously opposed by some players that " the grand battle of the penultimate " ensued. The old players indeed regarded the new system with the same horror as they had formerly displayed with respect to the French school, stigmatizing it not only as an innovation, but as a private understanding, and even as cheating! Even Clay, the greatest player of his day, was at first an opponent of the penultimate lead, but after consideration adopted It.

General Drayson (Art of Practical Whist, 1879) was the first to propose an analogous system, namely, that six cards in a suit, not including the ace, could be shown by leading the antepenultimate card, but his proposal, logical though it was, did not at first find favour. Before this (1874–187) leads from high cards, having regard to the number held in the suit, had not escaped attention, several innovations being introduced, but it yet remained for some one to propound a constant method of treating all leads, and to classify isolated rules so as to render it possible to lay down general principles.

This was done in 1883–1884 by Nicholas Browse Trist of New Orleans, who introduced the system of " American Leads." American leads propose a systematic course of play when opening and continuing the lead from the strong suit. First, with regard to a low card led. When you open a strong suit with a low card, lead your fourth best. When opening a four-card suit with a low card, the lowest, which is the fourth best, is the card selected. When opening a five-card suit with a low card, the penultimate card is selected. Instead of calling it the penultimate, call it the fourth best.

So with a six-card suit; but, instead of antepenultimate, say fourth best. And so on with suits of more than six cards: disregard all the small cards and lead the fourth best. Secondly, with regard to a high card led, followed by a low card. When you open a strong suit with a high card and next lead a low card, lead your original fourth best. The former rule was to proceed with the lowest. Thus, from ace, knave, nine, eight, seven, two, the leader was expected to open with the ace, and then to lead the two. An American leader would lead ace, then eight. Thirdly, with regard to a high card led, followed by a high card. When you remain with two high indifferent cards, lead the higher if you opened a suit of four, the lower if you opened a suit of five or more.

A player who adopts this system notifies by it to his partner that, when he originally leads a low card, he holds exactly three cards higher than the one led ; when he originally leads a high card, and next a low one, he still holds exactly two cards higher than the second card led; and when he originally leads a high card, and follows it with a high card, he indicates in many cases, to those who know the analysis of leads (as laid down in whist books), whether the strong suit consisted originally of four or of more than four cards. (See Whist Developments, by "Cavendish," 1885.)

These leads led to an overhauling of the play of the second and third hands, whist becoming apparently so complicated as to deter players of moderate ability from plunging into its intricacies. This fact. combined with the introduction of the fascinating and simpler game of bridge, caused a distinct decadence in the popularity of whist during the last decade of the 19th century.

Whist (i.e. modern "short" whist) is played with a full pack of 52 cards. The ace is the highest, except in cutting, when it is the lowest. After the ace rank king, queen, &c., in order, down to the two. Four persons play, but with only three or two players the game can still be played with certain modifications (see Dummy below). The players each draw a card, the one who gets the lowest deals, and has choice of cards and seats. The player who draws the next lowest is his partner; if two or more players draw cards of equal value, they cut again, the lowest playing with the original lowest.

The cards are then cut and dealt one by one from left to right. The last card is turned up to show the trump suit. In America the trump suit is sometimes cut for, the card then being replaced in the pack before shuffling (blind trump). A misdeal passes the deal, and at the end of each hand it passes in any case to the player on the left. At the end of the first trick the dealer takes the turned trump card into his. hand. If he fails to do so, the card may be called to any subsequent trick. The player on the dealer's left leads, and it is compulsory for the others to follow suit if possible, under penalty. for "revoke" (by which the adversaries may either add three to their

score, deduct three from the defaulting side, or take three tricks of theirs and add them to their own).

A player who cannot follow suit may play any card he chooses to the trick unless he has exposed a card and the adversaries call it. The highest card, or trump (if one is played), wins the trick, the winner leading to the next trick. When all the cards have been played the tricks gained by each side are counted, each trick over six counting one. Six tricks are called a "book." Trump honours—ace, king, queen, knave—also count to the score, but a side which has a score of four at the beginning of a hand cannot score for honours.

Tricks count before honours; thus if one side has a score of one and holds four honours, while the other has a score of four and makes the odd trick, the latter wins a double, the honours not counting, as the game has already been won by tricks. The scores for honours are as follows, but some players halve these scores, or, particularly in America, do not count honours at all. This is a matter of arrangement. If one side holds all four honours, four points; if three, two points; if both sides hold two there is no score, honours being "divided," or "easy."

A rubber consists of the best of three games, unless one side wins the first two games. A game consists of five points. Thus if one side makes nine tricks and holds three honours it scores a game—three points by tricks (or " by cards ") and two by honours—but if a revoke has been made, i.e. if a player, holding a card of the suit led, has played a card of another suit, the revoking side cannot score more than four, whatever its score in points may be. The side that wins the rubber scores two points in addition to the game points, which are reckoned thus: three points for a "treble," a game in which the adversaries have no score; two points for a "double," i.e. when the adversaries have made one or two; one point for a "single," i.e. when they have made three or four. Thus two trebles and the rubber (or "rub") count eight points; treble, single and the rub count six points. If the losers have won a game, its value is deducted.

Sometimes, by arrangement, the rubber points are raised to four. At the end of a rubber, or, by arrangement, of two rubbers, the players cut again for partners. If others wish to join the table the original players cut, the highest going out. It is not customary for more than two to join— technically, to "cut in"; hence, if two players vacate at the end of the next rubber, they now take the place of the other original pair, who leave without cutting. When only one player "cuts in," the other three retire by rotation, decided by cutting, and come back in their turn. If more than four players wish to form a table, they cut first to see who shall stand out, the highest retiring; they then cut afresh for partners.

Dummy Whist is played by three players, two being partners and the other playing with dummy, whose cards, which must be dealt face downwards, are exposed on the table before the play begins. Dummy has the first deal in every rubber. His cards being exposed he is not considered able to revoke; if he does, there is no penalty, nor is his partner liable for any mistake of his own whereby he cannot profit, e.g. by exposing a card; but if he leads from the wrong hand, a suit can be called.

At Double Dummy each player has a dummy partner, and there is no misdeal, as the deal is a disadvantage.

The leads and the play of the different hands have been so minutely systematized that some of the various text-books should be studied carefully by any one who wishes to become proficient, but some broad general rules may be useful to the beginner. The original leader should lead from his strongest, which is almost always his longest suit, but if his longest suit contains only four cards and is also the trump suit, opinions differ, though most players would observe the general rule. The same rule applies to subsequent. first leads of a suit, unless they have to be modified owing to information derived from cards already played.

Thus a player who has to lead after, say, the third or fourth trick may have to sacrifice his lead of his strongest suit in response to a "call for trumps" by his partner. Such a lead is called a "forced" lead, and from three cards the highest should invariably be led, and, if the opportunity occurs, the second best at the second lead, but from four the lowest should be led. This lead of the highest from three applies to all forced leads, whether they are due to a "call," or to the fall of the cards already played.

As a broad rule an ace is led always when five or more are held in the suit, but if you have the king also, lead it first; from a five suit without the ace lead the worst but one. With ace and two or three small ones, lead a small one; with ace and one small one, the ace. The second hand generally plays his worst card, but if an honour is led and he holds the ace, he should play the ace; also holding queen and king he should play the queen, or with knave, queen and king, the knave. If queen is led it is usually unwise to put on the king, but it is generally sound play to put the knave on the ten.

With king and one other, or queen and one other, most players advocate the play of the small card; some would play the king under these conditions, but not the queen; many play the queen and not the king; but the state of the score may affect the play. If it is important to get the lead, so as to lead trumps, the honour should be played, but as a rule the second hand reserves his strength. The third hand should win the trick if he can, unless he knows that his partner's card is a winning one; consequently he generally plays his highest card. The fourth hand should win the trick if he can, as a player is justified in passing a trick only if by so doing he is absolutely sure of winning two.

Returned Leads.—A partner's lead should be returned at once, unless one has a strong suit of one's own, in which event it is advisable to lead a card of it, to guide one's partner as to his future lead, but a lead of trumps must be returned as soon as possible. If a player holds three cards originally in his partner's suit he should invariably return the higher of the two left in his hand after the first round. Thus holding ace, three, two only, he should win with the ace and return the three; when the two falls afterwards, his partner will know that he holds no more. So, with ace, knave, ten only, win with the ace and return the knave, though from a scoring point of view the knave and ten are of equal value. With tour originally, return the lowest, but a winning card should always be led or played in the second round, unless there is any special reason for retaining it.

If your partner has called for trumps and you get the lead, with four trumps lead the smallest, with three lead the highest, and, if it wins, go in with the next highest. This law is universal in trumps (and also applies to forced leads from three-card suits) even if ace, king and another be held, from which the ordinary lead would be the king.

If, however, one adversary has obviously played his last trump, a third round is not always advisable, as two trumps will fall from the leader and his partner, and only one from the adversaries. On the other hand it is generally good play to draw two opposing trumps for one, so that they may not make separately.

In the play of a hand never play an unnecessarily high card—unless you are "calling." Thus, holding ten and knave, play the ten; your partner will infer that you do not hold the nine, but may hold the knave, and even the queen as well, though all the cards are of equal value for making tricks. Similar inferences should be drawn from all cards played, and should be drawn at the moment. Never play false cards unless you see your partner is so weak that it can do no harm to deceive him; in such a case, with knave and ten, the knave may be played. It is a maxim that information given by play is more valuable to the partner than it is to the two adversaries.

Trumping or "Ruffing" and Discarding. The second player should not trump a doubtful card (i.e. a card that his partner might be able to beat), if he is strong in trumps; if weak, he should trump. A winning card from an adversary should be trumped in any case. With weak trumps, it is bad play to "force" one's partner, i.e. invite him to trump; but with strong trumps force him. If your partner refuse to trump an adverse winning card, lead a trump at the first opportunity. If you have a "cross-ruff" (i.e. if you and your partner can trump different suits), those suits should be led alternately, and not trumps.

Force an adversary who is known to be strong in trumps. A weak suit in trumps (three only) should be led if the adversaries have a cross-ruff, or if the game is hopeless unless partner is strong, or if winning cards are held in all plain suits, which might be trumped.

It is usual to discard originally from the weakest suit, but if the adversaries are shown to have strength in trumps, from the strongest, i.e. the longest, so as to guard the weak suits. With absolute command of a suit, if you are compelled to discard from it, discard the winning card to inform your partner that you have command; e.g. with king, knave, ten—ace and queen being out—discard the king. Tits call "for trumps", an artifice, which is also known as to "ask," to "signal," to "hang out blue-Peter" or to "peter," for trumps, consists in playing an unnecessarily high card, followed later by a lower one, e.g. by playing the three before the two, or the ten before the nine. As the "call " is an imperious command, equivalent to "sacrifice everything, partner, for the sake of leading trumps," it is only justified by great strength in the trump suit. The echo: To your partner's call you should "echo," if you hold four or more, by calling yourself, however low your trumps are. Similarly four trumps may be shown in partner's lead of trumps by playing a high card followed by a lower one.

General Maxims. Play to the score. If winning the odd trick saves or wins the game, do not try risky combinations for the sake of getting two or three tricks. Count your cards before playing. If your partner "renounces," i.e. discards or trumps, always ask him if he has a card of the suit led, to save the revoke. Announce the score when you mark it. Watch the fall of every card. Study the rules, especially those about penalties and consultation with partner.

If the winning of one more trick wins or saves the game, and you hold the winning card, play it, unless it be the winning trump, which is good at any time. Retain the trump-card if you can play others of equal trick-making value; your partner then knows the position of one trump; e.g. with nine and ten in addition to the eight, the turn-up, play them before parting with the eight. Keep command of adversaries' suits as long as is judicious; get rid of the command of partner's strong suit.

Do not finesse (i.e. play a lower card than your highest in the third hand) in partner's suit, unless he leads a high card in an obviously forced lead. Lead through a known strong suit on your left, and (especially) up to a known weak suit on your right. If you have to lead from a suit of two lead the highest. Leading from a "singleton" (your only card in one suit), in order to be able to trump— sometimes disparagingly called "Whitechapelling"—is not generally good play, and results badly unless the side is strong in trumps, but in some circumstances it is useful.

Do not lead from a " tenace " (i.e. best and third best of a suit) if you have another equally good suit. Remember that whist is a game of combination, and that tricks made by your partner are just as valuable to you as tricks made by yourself. Sort your hand so as to keep the suits separate, red and black alternately, keeping the cards each in order of their value.

For Long Whist the play of the hands and the laws of the game are practically the same as at ordinary or "short" whist, but a more venturesome style of play may be adopted in view of the number of points required, i.e. a certain amount of risk may be taken when the odd trick is a certainty in the hope of getting two or three tricks instead. With the score at nine, honours

cannot be secured, but at eight a player who holds two honours may ask his partner before playing if he too holds an honour, the formula being "Can you one, partner?" If the answer is "Yes," the honours are scored and the game ends. There is no "treble" at long whist. A double is scored when the losers are less than five, a single if they have made five or more. The game, however, is almost obsolete.

Progressive Whist.—This form of the game is social rather than scientific, but is a pleasant variety on the ordinary round game. The host provides prizes, as a rule—first, second and "booby " prizes for both ladies and gentlemen, the "booby" prizes going to the players who make the fewest points. Any number of tables may be formed. Partners are selected by lot. two ladies and two gentlemen never being partners. This can be done by means of two sets of tickets of different colours, numbered identically, No. I pairing with No. I and so on.

After the first round there is no drawing for partners, as will be seen. The holders of all tickets numbered i and 2 form the first table, of 3 and 4 the second table. Only one pack of cards is needed at each table, but every player should be provided with a scoring card and pencil. The players at all the tables cut for deal, but no dealing is begun before a signal given by the master of the ceremonies. At each table one hand only is played. Honours are not counted. The score is marked by the number of tricks made, or the winner may mark all tricks above six. The winners remain at their original tables. The losers move on, from No. I table to No. 2, from No. 2 to No. 3 and from the last table to No. I. Partners are formed afresh, the gentleman who has just won playing with the lady who has just lost, and vice versa. Play may last for one or more complete rounds, or for a given time, indicated by a signal, after which no fresh hand is begun. The scores are then added up and the prizes awarded. In playing the ordinary rules of whist are observed.

A printed existence was first given to the laws of whist by Hoyle in 1743. The fourteen laws then issued were subsequently increased to twenty-four. These laws were the authority until 1760, when the members of White's and Saunders's Chocolate Houses revised them. The revised laws (nearly all Hoyle) were accepted by whist players for over a century, notwithstanding that they were very incomplete. The laws of short whist, a more comprehensive code approved by the Portland and Arlington clubs, were brought out in 1864, and became the accepted standard, small modifications only having been introduced since. The latest edition of the rules should be consulted for what is not indicated in the text.