

Design of the Staunton Chess Set

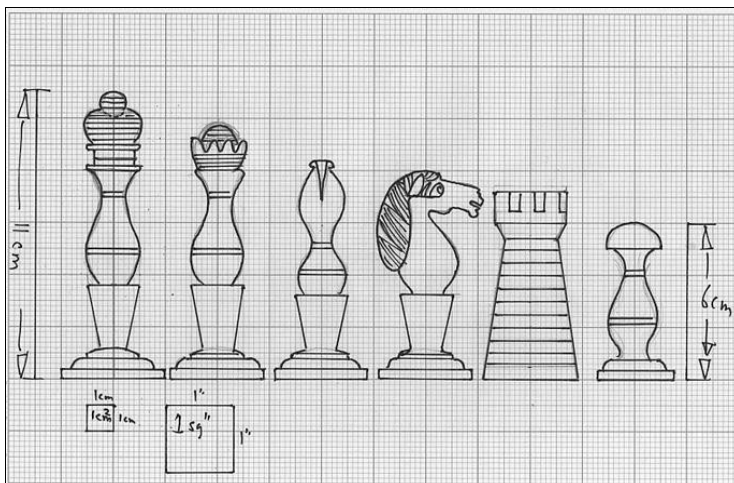
Chess restorer Alan Dewey, <http://www.chessspy.co.uk>, and historian Milissa Ellison summarise the generally-accepted understanding of how the Jaques Staunton Chess set design came into being, and speculate a bit about the parts that are not yet known.

It is 1847 or 1848. John Jaques of Jaques of London, *de facto* world chess champion Howard Staunton, and printer and editor Nathaniel Cooke¹ surely on occasion sat down together in the members' lounge of Simpsons in the Strand. At such times, conversations must have turned more than once to the sorry state of the chess sets in use in the clubs of the day.

What was the problem? According to Howard Staunton, who had a chess column in the *Illustrated London News* from 1845 until 1874, it was one of practicality: the sets in use weren't ideal for play. Many of the *Régence* pieces looked confusingly similar and were easily tipped over.² "One should see the heathen sets in use in the *Régence* club in Paris, why, a gentleman could easily mistake the queens, bishops and pawns!" Staunton might have said.³ Alternatively, the St George sets (despite their durable English appeal and sturdy bottoms) had such chunky pieces that the pawns disappeared from view during a game



John Jaques was no stranger to innovative chess design. In 1828 his firm had designed the sets for the Simpsons in the Strand chess club, the Grand Cigar Divan. Moreover, Jaques also marketed a variety of designs, such as the popular St George style as well as the Northern Upright, or Edinburgh. We know this because remnants of the 1849 Jaques sales catalogue are extant and show designs for both these chess set styles.⁴



Scale drawing of 1828 set for Simpsons in the Strand, designed and produced by Jaques of London.⁵ The remains of the only existing club set are on display in the foyer of Simpson's: it is not complete and has had rooks from one or more other sets added to it for display purposes. The only other existing set—this one complete but perhaps with mismatched knights?—is owned by collector and author Gareth Williams.⁶



*Left, top: St George, Jaques Pattern Books. Many different manufacturers made similar sets to these. All are now collected under the same name, viz., St George style, even though there is good reason to simply call them Old English. The multiple collars are a turner's fancy and Howard Staunton rightly pointed out that, '[f]or the most part the Chess-men intended for play... have been designed by the manufacturers alone...[who] have given us patterns as ugly and as inappropriate as could well be conceived.'*⁷

Left, bottom: Northern Upright, or Edinburgh style, so called because it was associated with the Edinburgh chess club. Staunton said this set was designed by Lord John Hay "a few years" before 1849 and probably no earlier than 1838.⁸ According to Club history, it was renting premises in St Andrews Square by this year.⁹ A successful chess club could adopt or design a set, usually naming the design after itself or the design coming to be known by the Club name by long association.



Newspaper coverage of international contests fueled popular interest in chess. So did spectacular events such as the chess-playing pseudo-automaton "The Turk" and the long-distance telegraphic chess matches of the 1840s. Even if chess were not yet commonly being played in parlors and kitchens, it certainly was in the clubs.

Upon the death of Philidor [1795], the Chess Clubs at the West-end [of London] seem to have declined; and in 1807, the stronghold and rallying point for the lovers of the game was "the London Chess Club," which was established in the City, and for many years held its meetings at Tomm's Coffee-house, in Cornhill. To this Club we are indebted for many of the finest chess-players of the age; and even now, after the lapse of nearly a century, the Club still flourishes, and numbers among its members some of the leading proficient. About the year 1833, a Club was founded by a few amateurs in Bedford-street, Covent Garden. This establishment, which obtained remarkable celebrity as the arena of the famous contests between La Bourdonnais and M'Donnell, was dissolved in 1840; but shortly afterwards, through the exertions of Mr. Staunton, was re-formed under the name of "the St. George's Club," in Cavendish-square...deservedly ranking as the most influential club of the kind in England.¹⁰

Timbs, from whose memoirs the above was excerpted, went on to mention smaller, usually informal associations formed by and for chess players that, along with the London and St George's clubs and the magnificent Grand Cigar Divan, accomodated a sizeable chess playing population in the London area alone, let alone England.

Reading chess club soiree



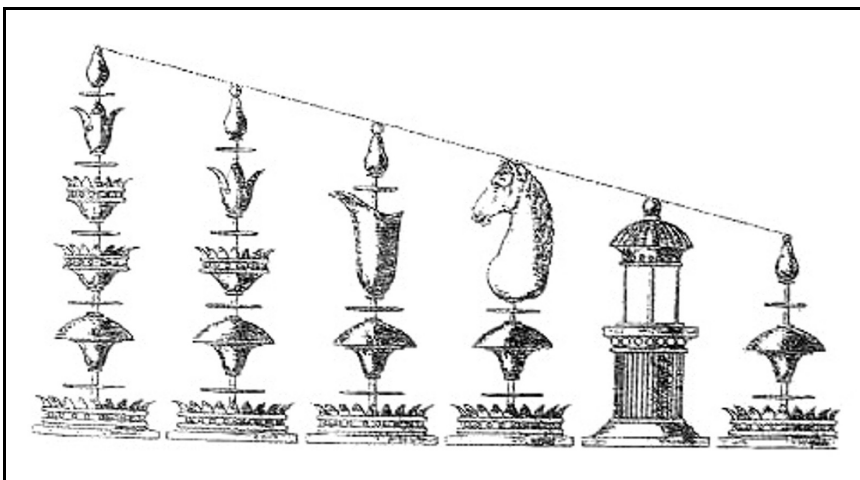
Charles Dickens, in his *Dickens's Dictionary of London*, largely supported Timbs' observations with his own. Dickens spoke additionally of, "a West-end chess club [that] was established [in 1823], with special rooms, &c., at the Perry Coffee-house in Rathbone-place". He also noted the dominance of strong players at the established clubs, which sparked the rise of venues for amateur and beginning players in "numerous coffee-houses, where "Monsieur" and "Herr," who since the first French Revolution have been always with us, dispensed instruction at such charges as their modest requirements suggested."¹¹



Rather obviously, all these chess players needed chess sets. A new design was needed. Being not afraid of greatness, Howard Staunton, John Jaques, and Nathaniel Cooke chose this moment to thrust themselves onto the world's stage, each with his part in bringing forth the chess set design that dominates chess play (and to a large degree, even our very idea of chess sets) to this day. Howard Staunton was calling for a new chess set design by 1848, saying that the set's pieces must have, "[a] stable heavy base, but be slender enough towards the top part so



that other pieces [on the board] were not obscured".¹² As had been done already by the German Edel family, the new chess design should feature taller pieces in the center with the pieces becoming shorter moving outward toward the edge of the board.¹³ Aside from providing a pleasing symmetry, this gradation of heights would allow for increased visibility of the forward pieces.¹⁴

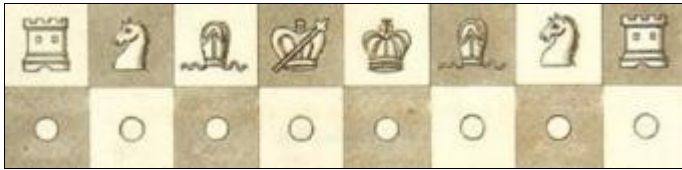


Above, top left: John Jaques.¹⁵ Above, right: Howard Staunton.¹⁶ Immediate left: Edel chess pieces:

"...Following the **old rule**, the height of the chess pieces should then... decrease in such a manner that if one drew a diagonal from the top of the king to a pawn, the tops of all the other pieces must be touched by this line."¹⁷

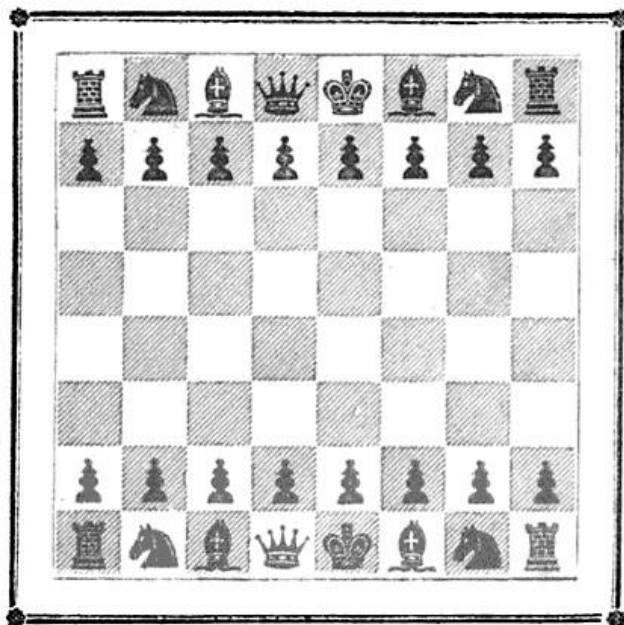
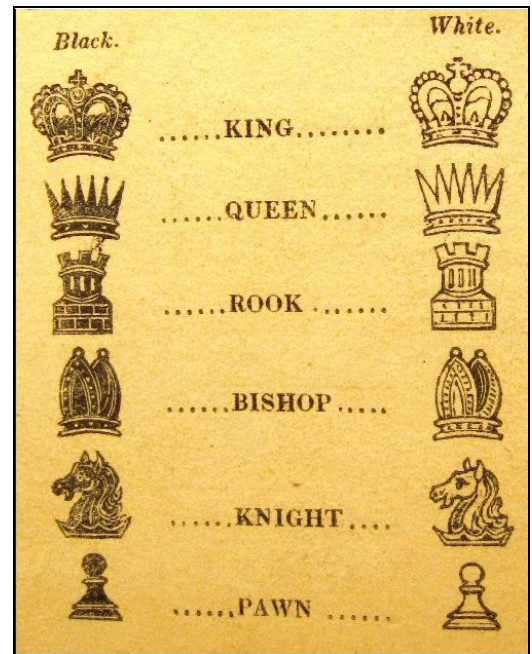
A crucial remaining decision was the shapes of the pieces themselves: they must not only be functional, but be readily recognized by all. A significant problem in competitions between clubs was that whatever house set design—St George, Edinburgh, *Régence*—was in use would be one familiar to the home player but not necessarily to the visitor. None of the current styles satisfied all the needs, though: as discussed earlier, both the *Régence* and Edinburgh styles were unstable, with the *Régence* also having pieces that closely resembled each other. The St George style was, to put it bluntly, chunky.

Perhaps it was Nathaniel Cooke who realized that, as printed chessbook symbols were virtually standardized already (and thus were widely recognized), these symbols for game play in books simply could be used for the shapes of the pieces in the new chess set. As some evidence of the link between symbol and shape, we see that most game diagrams prior to 1820 had employed as symbol for the Queen a closed crown. Roughly thirty years before the development of the Staunton design, chess books increasingly began to use a coronet for the Queen: this is a signal difference marking the Staunton design of chess sets for play apart from all other chess sets.¹⁸



Left: Kenny (William Stopford), *Practical Chess Grammar* (1818). Note use of closed crown as symbol for Queen.¹⁹

Right: Frontispiece to *The Incomparable Game of Chess*, D. L. Ponziani (1820).²⁰ This is the first use of a Queen with coronet found in the research for this essay. Also note the pawn, which could hardly have looked more like a Staunton pawn. Ideas were still in flux, though. For example, Staunton's own *Chess Player's Chronicle* (1842), published just 6 years prior to the registration of the Staunton design, used an earlier pawn style. See below.



It's time now to conclude, and return to the Grand Cigar Divan where we left John Jaques, Howard Staunton and Nathaniel Cooke. Their evening has wound down as well, and perhaps a chess set design has been decided upon. Exactly how their ideas, experience, skills, and goals meshed together is largely unknown and remains an active topic of research.²¹ We hope that this essay has adequately sketched out what is known, what is debated, and what is purely speculative.

What also is important to recognize is that the Staunton style chess design first brought to production by Jaques of London in 1849 has long been adopted all over the world. For over 160 years it has been the standard chess set used in tournaments and clubs. Indeed, for many of us, Staunton style chess sets are what we see in our mind's eye when we think of chess sets: they are what we grew up with.



1852 Staunton Chess set by Jaques of London, with modern casket donated by Joe Jaques, presently CEO of the Company. Note facsimile of Staunton's signature—he personally signed the label of each set in the first production series and each modern Jaques set now comes with a reproduction.

¹Endnotes

We wanted this essay to have notes! Rather than footnotes, we chose endnotes so as not to distract the casual reader. While it may not be the norm to provide notes and citations for commercial website webpages, this essay is a separate and privately owned publication donated to Jaques of London by the authors, so we structured it as we thought best. So, even though this is not full-dress scholarly research, we chose to show you why we said what we did.

The familial and professional relationships between these men are discussed by Michael Mark, *Chess Collector* magazine (vol.XII, no.1, pp.1-6 and vol.XIII, No.1, pp.3-5). Researcher Mick Deasey reminded us of this debate in the course of his own investigations whilst we were re-assessing this article (unpublished correspondence, 26 October 2010). Cooke, while quite involved in the business of Jaques of London, is consistently reported as having been Jaques' brother-in-law when in fact his daughter would marry John Jaques II much later.

² These are the French-designed *Régence* style popularised by Philidor and the famous Café de la Régence Chess Club of Paris, and were used extensively on the Continent as well as elsewhere. They were very popular in America, if the abundance of such sets here is any indication. Benjamin Franklin is known to have had one, and also gave one to his friend, botanist John Bartram. The tabiya in the picture, with knight next to Queen, is documented by Diderot and D'Alembert in their *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 1770 edition. Alan Dewey thanks Joost van Reij for this information (private correspondence, dates lost). Finally, note the striking similarity of the pieces, and how narrow the bases are. Lovely to look at, the Regence is difficult to play. Photo: <http://picasaweb.google.com/chessspy/DatingRegenceSets#5258944616940894290>

³ What he later said in his *Illustrated London News* column was that, "In the simplicity and elegance of their form, combining apparent lightness with real solidity, in the nicety of their proportions one with another, so that in the most intricate positions every piece stands out distinctively, neither hidden nor overshadowed by its fellows, the "Staunton Chess Men" are incomparably superior to any others we have ever seen." H Staunton, "Chess", column in *ILN*, 8 September 1849. Confirmation of citation courtesy of Jon Crumiller.

⁴ Referred to as the *1849 Catalogue*, it is an unbound collection of game designs and patterns, including chess sets, and was in constant use and revision until it was largely destroyed by fire and water damage caused by the London Bombing of 1941. There are approximately 65 pages remaining, according to Mike Darlow (*Turned Chessmen*, page 41) and archived by them as part of the proud Jaques heritage.

⁵ Scale drawing by Alan Dewey. Note the open crown on the queen: a first move to the coronet? Almost all other English designs of that period (early C19th) had a ball atop the Queen, perhaps as a way of showing that each pawn could be promoted to a Queen.

⁶ See Gareth Williams, *Master Pieces: The story of chess: the pieces, players and passion of 1000 years* (Apple: London, 2000), pp 52-53.

⁷ Howard Staunton, "Chess", *Illustrated London News*, 20 October 1849. Courtesy of John Crumiller.

⁸ Same as above.

⁹ <http://www.edinburghchessclub.co.uk/> (Accessed 27 October 2010)

¹⁰ John Timbs, *Curiosities of London: exhibiting the most rare and remarkable objects of interest in the metropolis, with nearly sixty years' personal recollections*, 1855 edition, page 79-80. (<http://books.google.com/books?id=1vw9AAAACAAJ&dq=timbs%20curiosities%20london%20upon%20the%20death%20of%20philidor&pg=PA80#v=onepage&q&f=false>; accessed 27 October 2010.)

¹¹ *Charles Dickens (Jr.)*, *Dickens's Dictionary of London*, 1879 (excerpted online at <http://www.victorianlondon.org/entertainment/dickens-chessclubs.htm>, accessed 27 October 2010, and also on Google books, "Chess-Clubs", pages 66-67, accessed 27 October 2010).

¹² See note 3, above.

¹³ Gareth Williams, *Masterpieces* (Apple Press: Quintet Publishing Limited, London, 2000) pg. 67. Williams says of Edel chess pieces as illustrated here that the sets were available “circa 1840” (pg 66).

¹⁴ See note 3, above.

¹⁵ <http://www.jaqueslondon.co.uk/about-jaques-london> (accessed 28 October 2010)

¹⁶ Engraving from <http://www.chesshistory.com/winter/extra/staunton.html>, accessed 28 October 2010; the source for this is not noted on the website from which this was taken. This is an interesting composition, and one suspects Staunton had some say in it. Staunton is holding his book, *The Chessplayer's Handbook*, and before him and the book is a lone king, flanked by two of his own knights. One is left to surmise who might think of himself as a king... And did he want to receive a knighthood, since he was already the King of Chess? Setting aside Staunton's undoubted ambitions, it is also worth noting that the three pieces on the board are of no known design—while there are English elements to the King, there is no identifying feature. We presume the engraving was done before 1849, as it seems reasonable that Staunton would have insisted on a Jaques Staunton set before him after the date these came onto the market, although the *Illustrated London News* engraving of 14 July 1856 which has Staunton as a member of famous chess players does not feature a Staunton set, either, but instead what looks to be a remarkably plain English bone one:

<http://www.britishchesssets.com/chess/Lyttleton/index.html>.

¹⁷ Emphases added. We rely here on an unsourced quote asserting that these are Edel's design notes. Gareth Williams, *Masterpieces* (Apple Press: Quintet Publishing Limited, London, 2000) pg. 68.

¹⁸ This is original research by Alan Dewey and is not supported by all researchers. It is a chicken and egg argument to try to determine whether printed symbol or physical shape came first for the bulk of the other pieces, but the employment of the Queen's coronet in the Staunton style design supports the argument that, by this late date in chess set design development, the printed symbols were used to determine piece design. Thus both the need for recognizeability and the requirement that each piece have its own distinct “look” were met at one blow. That Nathaniel Cooke, a printer and editor by trade, was the one who grasped the simplicity of the solution of letting the well-known printed form guide the physical one is a possible answer to the puzzling question of why his is the only name on the *Design Registration*.

¹⁹ Jon Crumiller,

http://www.crumiller.com/chess/chess_pages/books/StopfordPracticalChessGrammar.htm (accessed 28 October 2010)

²⁰ *Il giuoco incomparabile degli scacchi (The Incomparable Game of Chess)*, Domenico Lorenzo Ponziani, frontispiece to J. S. Bingham translation (London, 1820). Bingham (whoever he was, as the name is a *nom de plume*) misattributed this work to “dal Rio [sic]”: the double confusion has irritated bibliographers and antiquarians for two centuries now.

²¹ As mentioned in note 18, above, Nathaniel Cooke's is the only name on the Staunton chess set *Design Registration*, a patent document which he registered with the British Government on 1 March 1849. “The first sets were advertised in the *Illustrated London News* 29 September 1849” although Jaques of London, a wholesaler, was not mentioned in the ad even though the patent “protected against the design being copied by rivals for three years” and Jaques was the only manufacturer of these sets. Alan Fersht, *Jaques and British Chess Company Chess Sets* (Kaissa Publications: Cambridge, UK, 2010), pp. 3-5. The sets were stridently promoted by Howard Staunton through the press and other venues: see his “Chess” column in the *ILN* from 1848 onward.