

An Unrecorded Royal Oak Lottery Ticket

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The Royal Oak, located in the grounds of Boscobel house, was the tree in which the future King Charles II hid after the battle of Worcester in 1651 to avoid capture by the Roundheads. He eventually made it to France where he remained until he could return and reclaim the throne in 1660. The importance of the part played by the tree in this historical event is commemorated in several ways including the many pubs named the Royal Oak.

Shortly after the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, The Royal Oak Lottery was set up by Charles II to reward loyal Royalists who had fallen on hard times. It would seem that letters patent were freely given to operate lotteries and gambling games and the rewards did not always go to the intended 'truly loyal indigent officers.' Operated under licence the Royal Oak Lottery continued until the Lotteries Act of 1698 which banned all lotteries except those run by the State although the Royal Oak was allowed to continue until 1703 when the remaining licences expired.



Fig. 1 - Lottery ticket

The piece illustrated (brass, 19mm) depicts the Royal Oak on the obverse and has a representation of a twirling board or wheel of fortune on the reverse with the numbers XXIII, V, II, VII, X, III, XV, I, XX, VIII, IX, IIII around the edge. In the centre is a spinning pointer with the arrowhead at the top. Allowing for artistic licence the wheel depicted shows fewer numbers than on the actual wheel which was probably 24. This disc is very similar to the known specimens but without the banner round the oak tree⁽¹⁾. The late Robert Thompson was of the opinion that it was earlier than the other specimens before it was realised that THE LOYALL SUFFERERS needed to be spelled out on a banner around the tree⁽²⁾.

How these pieces were to be used is not known but it is likely that they entitled the holder to one game either as a prepaid ticket or as a free lure to a potential source of revenue for the operator.



Fig. 2 - La Petite Loterie

The design of 24 Roman numerals in a circle around a spinning pointer was perhaps one of the most basic in use but must have been popular since it continued in France throughout the 18th century and into the early 19th century as illustrated in the example shown⁽³⁾.

There was no laid down format for the Royal Oak lottery and the rules and odds given were at the discretion of the operator. It is likely that other types of gambling wheels were in use perhaps more like the wheel of fortune or carnival wheels that remained popular in England and which are still in use at fairs and fetes. The odds given are still atrocious and many of the wheels used at carnivals are crooked.

Around 1661 a licence was granted to Francesco Corbetta to operate the Catalonian game of Auca (Goose)⁽⁴⁾, a gambling game with a staking layout of 48 squares containing symbols or pictures and 48 small tickets, with the same designs as on the board, which could be drawn from a bag to determine the winning square⁽⁵⁾. By 1664 this game had changed its name to Royal Oak Lottery and presumably joined the various fairly crooked gambling games carried out under this title.

The 'Royal Oak' was operated by travelling agents who visited various fairs and towns where they stayed for a few days or set up a permanent establishment for several months until they were no longer welcome or their clientele ran out of money.

What may be the final development of the game can be seen in a print from the 1690's which shows a lottery game in progress together with the rules in Dutch, French and English⁽⁶⁾. Called The Royal Money Lottery it is the same game as the Royal Oak Lottery and indeed refers to it. The betting board layout is depicted and the randomiser is a 32 sided die which is dropped through a crowned vertical tube in the form of a model of an oak tree as an alternative to the wheel described above.

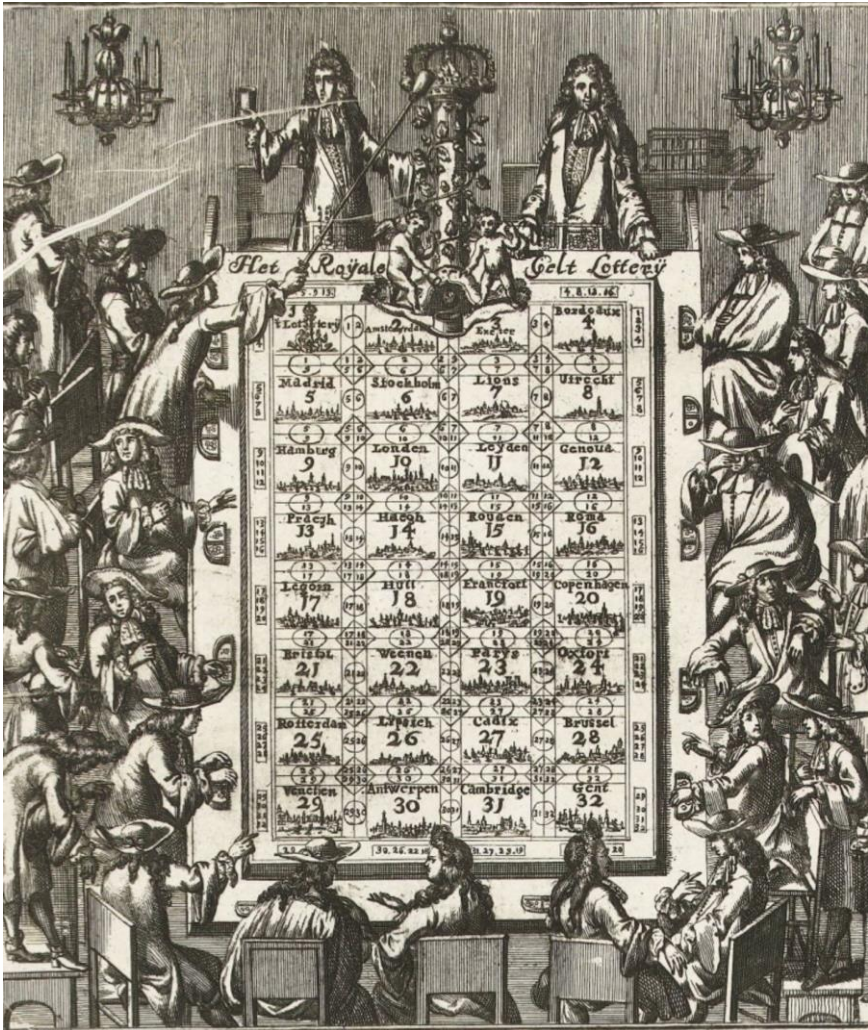


Fig. 3 - Section of 1690's print

The rules include ‘This Royal Money Lottery is the only Game authoriz’d in England where it is called the Royal Oak Lottery and authorized by their present Majesties, King William & Queen Mary’

Bets could be on a single number (winner receiving back 28 times the amount staked including his stake - thus odds of 27 to 1), a pair of adjoining numbers (14 times amount staked) or on various groups of four numbers (7 times).

The game depicted is from an actual game as played in Amsterdam at the time and the board and equipment was almost certainly more sophisticated than some of the games set up for temporary periods at fairs etc. in England.

A satirical pamphlet of 1699⁽⁷⁾ warns of the evils of the games, describes the amounts of money which could be lost and many of the criminal activities associated with the Royal Oak lottery. It also mentions the odds of 27 to 1 against 32 chances and may therefore be referring to the version of the game described in the 1690’s print.

It is interesting to note that the Royal Oak lottery appears to have many of the features of Roulette and must surely be considered as an ancestor of that game.

References and notes.

1. TCSB Volume 9, number 11, page 404 - The Loyal Sufferers Piece, Robert Thompson.
2. Correspondence with the late Robert Thompson.
3. Private collection, illustration courtesy of the owner.
4. The gambling game Auca should not be confused with Gioco dell’Oca (a well known race game, also called the Game of Goose).
5. Random Riches: Gambling Past & Present. Manfred Zollinger (ed.) Routledge, 2016
6. The full print with rules (which also include various notes) can be found in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam - object number RP-P-OB-82.859. It shows the game as it was played in the Golden Crown in Amsterdam.
7. The Trial and Condemnation of Squire Lottery alias Royal-Oak Lottery, London 1699.