

Activities of the People: Sports and Games of the Populace in Early Modern England

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to introduce and examine the leisure activities of the common people of early modern England, in particular their sports and games. With such a wide topic it is important to define at the start what aspects will not be explored in this discussion.

The first issue that will be left to the side is the poststructuralist argument that the very idea of a history of leisure is impossible because the people of the time would not have understood these activities as such.¹ Determining whether or not the idea of leisure existed at the time as it does now is beyond the scope of this work, although it is certainly worthy of discussion. For the purposes of this paper, I will use the terms as they are modernly understood, anachronistic or not, with the acknowledged caveat that it is possible that the exact idea did not exist at the time.

Debating the Puritan idea of “idleness” versus leisure and sport is also beyond the scope of this work. There exists an exhaustive body of work on Puritan ideas and ideals, and any attempt to integrate them into the argument of this work would be re-treading ground already well covered. With few, if any, exceptions, the Puritans considered all of the recreations that will be discussed as idleness and as separating one from God, and their attempts to ban them on Sundays lead to King James I’s *Declaration of Sports* in 1618.²

Gambling as well will be partially absent from this discussion, but only because gambling is not an activity on its own; one can bet on anything. The various games of

¹ Peter Burke, “The Invention of Leisure in Early Modern Europe,” *Past and Present*, no 146 (1995)

² Tho Cestren and James Tait, “The Declaration of Sports for Lancashire (1617),” *English Historical Review* 32, no 128 (1917): 561-568.

cards and dice that appear will be discussed in their own right, not as part of a discussion on the nature or prevalence of gambling.

Finally, this work will limit itself to those activities best described modernly as *games* or *sports*. Although mentioned briefly, dancing, festivals, and similar pastimes would once again push this paper past the limits imposed upon it. To this end I will primarily examine two important sources: the *Declaration of Sports* and the various guidebooks to popular activities that were published in the seventeenth century. The multitude of other printed works on individual games will also be consulted, but only where they intersect with the above.

Through this combination of sources it is possible to catch a glimpse of the individual cultures surrounding each type of recreational activity as well as come to some conclusions about their relative popularity. Despite the fact that the majority, if not the entirety, of these works were written for an aristocratic audience, what they say, or what they avoid saying, reveals much about the commonality and status of the recreations they are referencing. After examining the individual activities in detail it is possible to come to an overall conclusion about the state of leisure and recreation in general during the time period, without straying in the territory outlined above as being off-limits in this discussion, and also respond to one of Peter Burke's statements that leisure in general was becoming less marginal in the early modern period.³

Regardless of the title, the majority of the "sports" listed in the *Declaration of Sports* are anything but; dancing, Whitsun-ales, Morris-dances and May games specifically fall outside of this paper's focus. The controversies over dancing are well

³ Burke, 144.

established, Puritan and otherwise, and the debate over whether it was a moral activity or not was obviously still active during this period.⁴ Morris-dancing was a specific type of dance, also known as Morisco dancing, a relative of Spanish dances. Morris dances factored heavily into the more festival-like Whitsun-ales and May games, both of which involved dancing and revelry in general. The Whitsun-ales featured a man and a woman who were chosen to be Lord and Lady of the ale, and around them a whole faux-court would form.⁵

This leaves the two most outstanding activities mentioned in the *Declaration of Sports*: bowling and archery. The widely different natures, characters, and public histories of these two sports make them a perfect place to start on the road to answering many of the questions above. Following that is an examination of the games and sports listed in the guidebooks that were absent from the *Declaration of Sports*.

Of course, the guidebooks also contain some activities that are outside of this paper's purview, either because they were practiced only (or at least mostly) by the aristocracy, or because they are neither sports nor games. The former shall be discussed in some detail in a later section; of the latter, only a few stand out. For instance, one of the recreation guides, *The School of Recreation*, devotes a massive forty-five pages to a discussion of "Ringing," an activity that fits into both of the above categories. This is a type of musical performance involving the ringing of a multitude of heavy bells in time

⁴ Skiles Howard, "Rival Discourses of Dancing in Early Modern England," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 36, no 1 (1996): 31-56.

⁵ Thomas Hall, *Funebria Florae, the Downfall of May-Games* (London: 1660). G. A. Rowell, "Notes on Some Old – Fashioned English Customs: The Mummers; The Morris-Dancers; Whitsun-Ales; Lamb-Ales," *Folk-Lore Journal* 4, no 2 (1886): 97-109.

with the music.⁶ The author of the *School of Recreation* states that this activity has become popular of late because of the harmony it affords the ear, the mathematics within that delight the mind, and the violence of its exercise bringing health to the body.⁷ Ringing is mentioned only late in the early modern period; only two other guidebooks mention it at all, and those are incomplete.⁸

Bowling and archery, the points where the *Declaration of Sports* and the guides to recreations cross paths most conspicuously, are where this discussion will start.

Bowling

The authors of books on games and activities were always very careful about bowling. In the *Declaration of Sports* bowling is singled out, along with bear and bull-baiting, as an activity that will remain prohibited. Unlike the baiting sports, however, which were only restricted on Sundays, bowling was at all times prohibited “in the meaner sort of people.”⁹ This restriction dated back to Henry VIII, who made the sport unlawful for common people at all times,¹⁰ despite being an avid enough bowler himself that he built a bowling alley into Hampton Court.¹¹ Although enjoyed by the aristocracy,

⁶ Robert Howlett, *The School of Recreation: Or, The Gentleman's Tutor* (London: 1684): 138-183.

⁷ Howlett, 138.

⁸ J.S., *Profit and Pleasure United, or, the husbandman's magazene* (London: 1684). Gervase Markham, *The Compleat Husbandman and Gentleman's Recreation or, the Whole art of Husbandry* (London: 1695).

⁹ James I of England, *The Kings Maiesties Declaration to His Subiects, Concerning lawfull Sports to be vsed* (London: 1618), hereafter referenced as *Declaration of Sports*.

¹⁰ Cestren, 564.

¹¹ Simon Thurley, “Henry VIII and the Building of Hampton Court: A Reconstruction of the Tudor Palace,” *Architectural History* 31 (1988): 29.

it does not appear that bowling was an uncommon activity among the lower classes, regardless of the ban.

The first evidence for this is in the *Declaration of Sports* itself. By the time it is issued Henry VIII has been dead for almost a century, so the ban on bowling among the lower orders was hardly new, and yet the prohibition has to be reinforced. Further evidence in the *Declaration of Sports* for the game being more common than it should have been is that even the Secretary of State forgot that the game was banned amongst the public; in the first draft of the declaration from 1617, at the time intended just for Lancashire, bowling is mentioned as being only banned on Sunday along with the baiting sports.¹²

Further evidence for the common nature of the sport can be read into the *Country Contentments*, first published in 1615 by Gervase Markham. The subtitle of the book is, in part, the *Husbandman's Recreations*, although this certainly does not refer to any common farmer, considering that the majority of the book is taken up with the topic of hunting down to the finest detail. Bowling, while included since the first edition, is mentioned only in a three page chapter titled "Of Particular Recreations" and is grouped with archery and tennis, at least one of which we can easily recognize as a sport of the common people; both will be discussed shortly.¹³

After devoting (depending on the edition) thirty-five pages to the intricacies of hunting, and nineteen to hawking, including sections defining just what the above sports are, Markham considers the rules of bowling well enough understood that he limits

¹² Cestren, 564.

¹³ Gervase Markham, *Country Contentments: Or, The Husbandmans Recreations*, 4th Edition (London: 1631), 57-58.

himself to two paragraphs. The second of these gives advice on how to gain advantage at the sport by picking your ground and using the correct bowle for it; flat for close alleys, round-biased bowles for open ground, and round ball-like bowles for greens. The first paragraph merely recommends the game, in careful terms, as considered extremely wholesome even by physicians themselves, “howsoever unlawful in the abuse thereof.”¹⁴

The character of bowling did not change much as the end of the century approached. In the *Compleat Gamester*, a book focused less on hunting than on games of cards and dice, author Charles Cotton again describes bowling in careful terms, stating that it is healthy for the body “if moderately used” but describes most of those who play the game as the “swarms of rooks which so pester Bowling-Greens.”¹⁵ Despite devoting more space to the sport than *Country Contentments*, it is again implied that the reader already knows how to bowl, as the author states that he cannot through writing explain how to better bowl, as “practice must be your best tutor.”¹⁶

Robert Howlett wrote the *School of Recreation or, the Gentleman’s Tutor* in 1684, another guidebook to the various sports and activities that one could engage in during any leisure time they might have. Again like in *Country Contentments* the majority of the book is taken up discussing the particulars of types of hunting, hawking, and fishing. Bowling gets a larger mention here, warranting its own chapter, albeit only of four pages. Again the rules for the game are not explored in any detail; it is assumed that the reader is already familiar with them. Howlett first discusses what he believes to be history of the sport, beginning with the Lydians; I will not attempt to ascertain the

¹⁴ Markham, *Country Contentments*, 57-58.

¹⁵ Charles Cotton, *The Compleat Gamester* (London: 1674), 47.

¹⁶ Cotton, 48.

veracity of his claims in this area. He then discusses the character of the game, stating that while pious, learned, and sober persons often make up a company on a bowling green, the author must confess to playing in bowling alleys and bares, “which too usually are pestered with Damming-Rooks, Cunning Betters, Crafty Matchers, and base Booty-Players.”¹⁷ This is identical to the description Charles Cotton gives for the majority of the people who play the game. Quickly he wishes to not “detain you any longer in characterizing this excellent sport: (Excellent I mean if rightly used).”¹⁸

There is no doubt that *The School of Recreation* is intended for gentlemen to read; the evidence is right there in the title. But it, too, lends credence to the idea of bowling being at the very least a well-known game amongst the lower classes of the period. While it is a game that was doubtless commonly played by the aristocracy, there is sufficient evidence to show that it was also popular with the lower classes.

To summarize the above, it was popular enough for Henry VIII to ban it amongst the peasantry in 1511 because it was interfering with archery and work. Despite this, and a harsher ban enacted in 1541,¹⁹ it remained common enough that it had to be specifically mentioned as prohibited in the *Declaration of Sports* a century later; indeed, it was common enough that the Secretary of State forgot it was illegal at all, showing that at the very least the law against bowling was seldom enforced. Contemporary accounts of the game not only stress this illegality, they also imply that this law is often ignored and that many ruder characters participate actively in the sport; in the *Country Contentments*

¹⁷ Howlett, 130.

¹⁸ Howlett, 131.

¹⁹ Cestren, 564.

it is listed with sports of the common people. Beyond that, it is assumed that the reader already knows the rules.

Archery

In many senses, archery was considered the perfect activity. It is also perfect to juxtapose against bowling. In addition to being bracing exercise it was considered socially functional; only the Puritans considered it idleness.²⁰ The social function of archery was served by its paramilitary characteristics. Instead of being a primarily fun activity that people engaged in purely of their own volition, to the point of being legislated against in the case of bowling, archery is at least partly a compelled activity.

The general perception in the early modern period was that archery was a sport in decline. Considered an integral activity contributing to national defense in the medieval period, girls and boys alike began training in the use of the bow as early as age five across all the social ranks.²¹ The decline in participation in archery turned into legislation promoting and requiring the teaching of the sport by the early sixteenth century. The same law of Henry VIII's that prohibited bowling in 1511 was passed in an effort to encourage archery amongst the populace.²² A royal statute followed in 1512 that ordered that young boys were to learn archery. In theory, any man with a male child between

²⁰ Neil Harris, "Review: Fun and Games," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 7, no 1 (1976): 75.

²¹ Nicholas Orme, "The Culture of Children in Medieval England," *Past and Present*, no 148 (1995): 62-63.

²² Cestren, 564.

seven and seventeen was required by law to provide a bow and two arrows along with training in their use.²³

The *Declaration of Sports* also casts leisure activities as required and proper for the military preparedness of the nation, referring to the Puritan prohibitions that blocked physical activity as barring “the common and meaner sort of people from using such exercises as may make their bodies more able for war.”²⁴ Since it is unlikely that dancing was considered a necessary activity for making the body more prepared for the military, this comment can be taken to refer to archery, and again expresses the fear that this sport was in decline.

The focus on the martial value of archery as late as 1618 can be a little puzzling. Tracts were being published debating the relative merits of the bow versus muskets by the end of the sixteenth century. A “gentleman, souldier, and captaine” named Humphrey Barwick wrote *A Breefe Discourse Concerning the Force and effect of all manuell weapons of fire, and the disability of the Long Bowe or Archery, in respect of others of greater force now in use* in 1594; his opinion on the matter is clear from the end of his lengthy title.²⁵ An author with the initials R.S. wrote a *Briefe Treatise to proove the necessitie and excellence of the use of Archerie* two years later.²⁶ It is clear from the publication of this and other treatises advocating its use that despite the appearance of

²³ Orme, 63.

²⁴ *Declaration of Sports*

²⁵ Humphrey Barkwick, *A Breefe Discourse Concerning the force and effect of all manuell weapons of fire, and the disability of the Long-Bowe or Archery, in respect of others of greater force now in vse* (London: 1592).

²⁶ R. S., *A Briefe Treatise To Prooue the Necessitie and Excellence of the vse of Archerie* (London: 1596).

superior technology, people were not yet ready to abandon archery as a necessary defensive art in addition to whatever sporting character it might have had.

The guidebooks to the popular recreations also cast archery as a sport that is more *required* than *fun*. *Country Contentments*, as previously stated, lumps archery with bowling and tennis in a three page chapter on common recreations. Shooting the long bow is stated as “both healthful for the Body, and necessary for the Common wealth” by providing the shooter with the strength to “preserve and defend his Countrey.” The author then proceeds to describe the technique for using the bow. Interestingly it is implied that the physical exercise is not necessarily the “strength” that is imparted by the bow, as he offers up the crossbow as a valid replacement for those physically unable to use the long bow, stating that it will bring the same pleasure.²⁷ This contradiction can be taken two ways: either the primary purpose to archery is not the fun of recreation it imparts but rather the martial skill, or, that the pleasure of archery is not in the exercise, but in the display of skill at hitting the target.

By the end of the early modern period the idea of archery as requisite to the wellbeing of the kingdom is generally recognized as part of the past, taking with it a large part of the sport’s popularity. The opening of the *Compleat Gamester’s* chapter on the subject refers to archery as “a recreation...still in some parts of the world very useful in military affairs, but now quite laid aside by English men for fighting, there being found...more speedy ways to kill and destroy each other.” It is then referred to primarily

²⁷ Markham, *Country Contentments*, 56-57.

as a pastime, but one that is steeped in ancient custom and contests, and one that is still quite healthful for the body.²⁸

The books of the 1670s and 1680s all speak of archery as a sport that is no longer widely practiced. Charles Cotton's discourse on the sport in 1674 is cut short compared to the rest of the book because he saw it as so little practiced.²⁹ Two years later Robert Shotterel published an epic poem that reads like a eulogy, describing the long bow as the hero of the last age of England.³⁰ Howlett seems to take the loss of archery harder than most in his *School of Recreation* in 1684; he also disagrees that the era of the bow being used for national defense is past. In his words, he cannot but be concerned at how important the proper use of the bow used to be, and of what little importance it is when he writes.³¹

There is no doubt as to whether or not archery was an activity that could be referred to as common, but its nature as a sport is very different from that of bowling. In fact, they are polar opposites. We can see through contemporary accounts that bowling is a game that is considered in many ways *too popular*, while archery can never be *popular enough*. The value of archery as a pastime, then, is far less than one could assume by its commonality of practice. When all of the mandates for practice and the talk of shooting skill being required for national defense start to fade away, so does the popularity of the sport.

²⁸ Cotton, 203.

²⁹ Cotton, 203-204.

³⁰ Robert Shotterel, *The Bow-Mans Glory* (London: 1682).

³¹ Howlett, 121.

Bowling and archery, then, can stand as the bookends to the rest of the discussion of sports and games for the common people. On the one side is a sport that was entirely illegal but popular anyway. On the other is an example that only a Puritan could hate, one that served such an important social function that it was mandated from above through repeated declarations. The other sports mentioned in the *Declaration* and the guidebooks, and indeed all other activities of the commons in general, will obviously fall somewhere in between.

Not-So-Common Activities

The greatest benefit to starting with the *Declaration of Sports* and the activities it mentions by name is that it is immediately obvious that these activities were at least somewhat prevalent amongst the commons; these activities were singled out to be important. Moving beyond archery, bowling, and the festivals, the *Declaration* says only “that no lawful recreation shall be barred to our good people.”³² Determining the status of the games in the recreational guides is harder. The majority of the sports in the guidebooks are not the sort of thing that the common people would be participating in often, if at all, because they were primarily written for the aristocracy, or at least the wealthy.

Hunting is of such primary importance that it is the first recreation discussed in both the *Country Contentments* and the *School of Recreation*, taking up the first thirty-five pages in the former and twenty-six in the latter;³³ a large number of guides devoted solely to the subject were also printed. Markham describes hunting as “a curious search

³² *Declaration of Sports*

³³ Markham, *Country Contentments*. Howlett.

or conquest of one Beast over another;” an inclusive enough definition.³⁴ That commoners hunted deer and other animals during this time is not debated;³⁵ in fact they poached them, since the restrictions on hunting became increasingly draconian after the Game Law of 1604, with the roots of the prohibitions going well back into the Medieval period.³⁶

Here, however, a distinction must be made between hunting as a sport or game and hunting for practical purposes. There is no doubt that the common people hunted; there is also no doubt that they could not participate in the sport of hunting as described by the manuals of early modern England. The majority of the thirty-five pages that the *Country Contentments* devotes to the subject is involved in a discussion of the best way to breed, raise, train, and pick your hounds, including the best way to setup and keep your kennel healthy. What do you feed your dogs, and what proportion of meat do they get? How do you cure the diseases of your hounds? Horseplay is an important consideration as well.³⁷ Howlett treats the sport almost identically in the *School of Recreation*; different types of game are discussed and how to hunt them, he talks about the history of the royal sport, and then devotes most of his space to writing about the types and care of hounds.³⁸

³⁴ Markham, *Country Contentments*, 4.

³⁵ Chest Kirby and Ethyn Kirby, “The Stuart Game Preogative,” *English Historical Review* 46, no 182 (1931): 239-254. Elizabeth Lane Furdell, “Review: Hunters and Poachers,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 25, no 3 (1994): 676-677. William Rednour, “Review: Hunters and Poachers,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 49, no 1 (1996): 145-146. Buchanan Sharp, “Review: Hunters and Poachers,” *American Historical Review* 100, no 4 (1995): 1242-1243. J.A. Sharpe, “Review: Hunters and Poachers,” *English Historical Review* 111, no 442 (1996): 705-706.

³⁶ Furdell, 676.

³⁷ Markham, *Country Contentments*, 1-35.

³⁸ Howlett, 1-26.

To be clear, then, there is no argument that the common people hunted and poached; they did. It is obvious, however, that they did not, and could not, have participated in the recreation of hunting as it was organized as a sport. The amount of space devoted to hunting, the amount of thought put into it, the number of individual tracts printed about it, and its placement at the front of every book on recreation that mentions it, shows that it was paramount above all other sports in the realm of the aristocracy.

Hawking, as a specific type of hunting, tends to immediately follow it in the books of recreation. Like the more general hunting it was extremely popular and important amongst the royalty and the aristocracy, particularly in the early Stuart period.³⁹ It is described in the *Country Contentments* as a princely and serious delight,⁴⁰ and in the *School of Recreation* in exactly the same manner, nearly to the point of being plagiaristic.⁴¹ The intrinsic nature of hawking, with all the expenses and long training times involved, means that we can quickly discard this as a possible popular recreation.

Fishing as an activity occupies a position similar to hunting, in that there is no doubt that the commons pulled fish out of rivers and lakes to eat, to the point where the prohibitions against such were increased throughout the early modern period.⁴² There is also the fact that fishing as a commercial venture was big business throughout the period, especially from the Elizabethan era forward.⁴³ As with hunting, however, these activities

³⁹ Arthur MacGregor, "Animals and the Early Stuarts: Hunting and Hawking at the Court of James I and Charles I," *Archives of Natural History* [Great Britain] 16, no 3 (1989): 305-318.

⁴⁰ Markham, *Country Contentments*, 36.

⁴¹ Howlett, 23.

⁴² Furdell, 676. MacGregor.

⁴³ Rosemary C. L. Sgroi, "Piscatorial Politics Revisited: The Language of Economic Debate and the

are very different from fishing as an organized sport, more properly referred to as angling. This is the term most commonly used by the recreational guidebooks, where, like hunting, massive amounts of page space is devoted to their discussion: forty-three pages in the *Country Contentments* and a similar number in the *School of Recreation*, running down the best types of bait, season, and water source for a wide variety of fish.⁴⁴

Angling was restricted to the aristocracy by law, by economics, and by the amount of time required. As with hunting, its position in the guidebooks and historiography place it as paramount sport among the aristocracy; it even reached the point where angling was used in erotic images.⁴⁵

Horse racing is another game that the commons would have been priced out of. The specifics of picking what kind of horse, the quality of food that the guidebooks require to keep them in good health and racing condition, and the amount of care required to keep a racing horse healthy and happy, is again beyond the means of the majority of the populace.⁴⁶ According to the *School of Recreation* a good race horse requires fresh oats, fresh bread, and curiously a good quantity of meat (although not so much that he starts to play with it);⁴⁷ the *Compleat Gamester* states that for water they must have a cool clean river or a stream, about a mile from their stables, preferably where they can

Evolution of Fishing Policy in Elizabethan England,” *Albion* 35, no 1 (2003): 1-24.

⁴⁴ Howlett, 86-120. Markham, *Country Contentments*, 59-102.

⁴⁵ Anne Elizabeth McIlhane, “Renaissance Acts and Images of Angling: An Anatomy of the British Piscatory, 1496-1653,” PhD diss., University of Virginia, 1998.

⁴⁶ Cotton, 194-202. Howlett, 26-33.

⁴⁷ Howlett, 29-30.

gallop a bit afterwards.⁴⁸ This is not the sort of thing it is easy for the peasantry to account for.

There are other activities listed in the books that were mainly the practice of the gentry, such as billiards and trucks, but it is time to move on. What, then, of the recreations the majority of the population could participate in?

Cards and Dice; Tables and Balls

Being meant as guides to the activities of gentlemen, the majority of the books of recreations leave cards suspiciously absent. Games involving playing cards were so important that the cards were used for propaganda purposes by competing political parties. Political and inflammatory scenes were printed onto cards, as well as country maps and lessons on how to spell and write and cipher. The special packs were common enough to be advertised in newspapers widely; prices ranged from a shilling to four pence for the specially printed packs. The expense of the cards was offset by the communal use of the decks.⁴⁹ As well, the advertisements for the card packs stated that they were marked so that they could be played with as well as common cards; common cards would likely have been even cheaper. The popularity of these propaganda cards could be so great as to outstrip supply. Francis Barlow's Popish Plot pack was popular enough that the copper plates used to print it had to be re-cut.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Cotton, 196.

⁴⁹ Tim Harris, *London Crowds in the Reign of Charles II: Propaganda and politics from the Restoration until the exclusion crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987): 98-108. J.R.S. Whiting, "A Handful of History: Playing Cards in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *History Today* 31 (1981): 40-43.

⁵⁰ Whiting, 40.

Further attesting to the popularity of playing cards in the culture is the number of tracts written using a card game as a metaphor for a point or a poem.⁵¹ A like number of pamphlets were published decrying games of cards for reasons of religion, mostly for their association with gambling and games of chance; some of these even took the form of poems and songs.⁵²

The sheer number of card games listed in the recreation guides that do mention them can also attest to the popularity of cards. There are twenty chapters dedicated to the games in the *Compleat Gamester*, for instance, consisting of: Picket, Gleek, L'Ombre, Cribbage, All-Fours, English Ruff and Honors, Whist, French-Ruff, Five-Cards, Costly-Colours, Bone-Ace, Putt, Wit and Reason, Memory, Plain-dealing, Queen Nazareen, Lanterloo, Penneech, Post and Pair, Bankafalet, and Beast.⁵³ Some of these are immediately familiar to use even today; Memory is obvious, as are Whist and “Cribbage”.

The descriptions of some of the individual games can reveal a lot about the prevalence and character of the games. Strategies for betting and gambling in general abound, of course.⁵⁴ Whist and English Ruff are described as so common in the *Compleat Gamester* that every child in the whole of the realm is assumed to have a “competent knowledg in that recreation,” making the author “unwilling to speak anything

⁵¹ Edmund Gayton, *Chartae scriptae: or A new game at cards, call'd Play by the booke* (Oxford: 1645). L.P., *Vvin at first, lost at last; or, A new game at cards* (London: 1660). George Wither, *The knave of clubs* (London: 1643).

⁵² James Balmford, *A short and plaine dialog concerning the vnlawfulnes of playing at cards or tables* (London: 1593). Richard Crimsal, *Iohn Hadlands advice: or a warning for all young men that have meanes advising them to forsake lewd company cards, dice, and queanes* (London: 1635).

⁵³ Cotton, contents.

⁵⁴ Cotton, 81-153.

more of them than this, that there may be a great deal of art used in Dealing.”⁵⁵ It then describes the various ways to cheat for the rest of the chapter on the subject.⁵⁶ Sometimes the discussions of gambling and commonality are combined; Five-Cards, Post and Pair, and All-Fours are written as games much played for considerable sums of money.⁵⁷ The popularity of cards, then, is well founded.

Dicing is often mixed in with cards in both condemnations and discussions. Dice are also associated with the common board games of the time, referred to as table games or merely games of tables, many of which used dice, were bet on, and protested along with other games of chance.⁵⁸ Board games were well established in culture by the end of the Middle Ages, even familiar games such as chess, backgammon, and nine men’s morris.⁵⁹

Chess was well enough known that, much like playing cards, aspects of it were used in metaphorical and poetical statements on completely unrelated issues, such as the state of the kingdom.⁶⁰ A multitude of guides were written specifically for the game of chess, detailing different tactics and gambits for victory.⁶¹ Charles Cotton refers to the game as “more difficult to be understood than any other game whatever,” and believes

⁵⁵ Cotton, 114.

⁵⁶ Cotton, 114-120.

⁵⁷ Cotton, 111, 123.

⁵⁸ Balmford, Crimsal.

⁵⁹ Orme, 58-60.

⁶⁰ William Cartwright, *The game at chesse* (London: 1643). Damiano da Odenara, *Ludus scacchiae: = cheese-play A game, both pleasant, wittie, and politicke*, Translated by G.B. (London: 1597). Paul Yachnin, “A Game at Chess and Chess Allegory,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 22, no 2 (1982): 317-330.

⁶¹ Damiano. Gioachino Greco, *The Royall game of Chesse-play*, Translated by Francis Beale (London: 1656). Arthur Saul, *The famous game of Chesse-play* (London: 1673).

that this, combined with the tedious length of play, is the reason for the game's unpopularity; he only writes of it because of the singularly ingenious manner of the game.⁶² His accounting chess as unpopular may be surprising at first. Yet, despite being described as a famous, princely and royal game,⁶³ chess is completely absent from the guides to the noble recreations such as the *Country Contentments* and the *School of Recreation*.⁶⁴ Although it was very commonly known, chess was not that commonly played. It was a royal game that not even the king liked to play.⁶⁵

The more popular table games identified by the *Compleat Gamester*, the only guide to deal in depth with them, are Irish, Back-Gammon, Tick-Tack, Dubblets, Sice-Ace, and Ketch-Dolt. Backgammon is immediately familiar, but aspects of all of the above would be immediately recognizable to anyone familiar with board games four hundred years later. All of the above involve dice, and the majority use representative tokens that even in the 1600s were referred to colloquially as "men." The chance aspect of the dice is very important to these early board games; they are not far removed from pure dicing.⁶⁶ Interestingly some scholars have written about the game of "Tables" as synonymous with "Backgammon," when contemporary sources show that this is clearly not correct.⁶⁷

Pure dicing games are referred to in the *Compleat Gamester* as "Games without the Tables." It mentions only three: Inn and Inn, Passage, and Hazzard. Gambling and

⁶² Cotton, 51.

⁶³ Cotton, 51. Greco. Saul.

⁶⁴ Howlett. Markham, *Country Contentments*.

⁶⁵ Yachnin, 317.

⁶⁶ Cotton, 154-163.

⁶⁷ Delmar E. Solem, "Some Elizabethan Game Scenes," *Educational Theatre Journal* 6, no 1 (1954): 16.

risk are completely bound together in these games; betting is required in the rules. Even in a guide describing how to play them, in a sense advocating their play, these dice games are written of as so addictive as to be destructive. Of hazzard Charles Cotton writes: “Certainly *Hazzard* is the most bewitching Game that is plaid on the Dice...happy is he that having been much inclined to this-spending-money-wasting Game, hath...resolved for the future never to be concerned with it.”⁶⁸ Even amongst those who write about them without condemning them, dicing games can be both too common and too dangerous.

Cards and dice are always associated with the common people; their popularity comes as no surprise. Tennis, on the other hand, is not often grouped with common sports. First emerging as a named game in the fifteenth century, tennis was originally played against a wall.⁶⁹ Most often this wall was part of the players’ church, as tennis was a common game at the periodic “wake” festivals.⁷⁰ In a roundabout way, then, tennis is legalized in the *Declaration of Sports*, as the wake festivals and the activities associated with them are expressly allowed.⁷¹

The descriptions of tennis in the recreational guides are highly reminiscent of those for bowling. In addition to being a game of the commons, tennis was also extremely popular among the nobility; Henry VIII had courts to go with his bowling green at Hampton Court.⁷² Tennis, and its sister sport baloone, are mentioned in only a

⁶⁸ Cotton, 172-173.

⁶⁹ Orme, 62.

⁷⁰ Richard Suggett, “Festivals and Social Structure in Early Modern Wales,” *Past and Present*, no 152 (1996): 80, 90.

⁷¹ *Declaration of Sports*.

⁷² Thurley, 9.

paragraph in the *Country Contentments*, grouped in the same chapter of “particular recreations” of the commons as bowling and archery.⁷³ In contrast, Robert Howlett goes far out of his way to characterize the game as royal and proper; the nobility and gentility of the game are referenced more than ten times in just the opening two paragraphs of his chapter on the subject. In fact, according to Howlett, “it is reckoned one of the most absolute Qualifications of a well-bred Gentleman” to be completely familiar with the game.⁷⁴ But it was also one of the qualifications of a commoner at a church festival.

Conclusion

Having exhausted the activities listed in the *Declaration of Sports* and the recreational guides, what can be said about the state of leisure and gaming in early modern England?

The caveats that framed the introduction do not need to be restated, but it is worth noting again that the picture of the activities of the commons presented here is not complete. Limiting the games and recreations discussed to just those listed in the guidebooks and the *Declaration* creates at least one glaringly obvious gap: nowhere is football mentioned. The history of football is well covered in the historiography of recreations. It is possible that the game goes as far back than even the thirteenth century;⁷⁵ at the very least they were common and popular by the end of the Middle

⁷³ Markham, *Country Contentments*, 58.

⁷⁴ Howlett, 133-135.

⁷⁵ F. P. Magoun Jr., “Football in Medieval England and in Middle English Literature,” *American Historical Review* 35, no 1 (1929): 34-35.

Ages.⁷⁶ It was also a common activity at the wake festivals, along with tennis and bowling.⁷⁷ And yet it is entirely absent from the guides, even the *Compleat Gamester*, the one most focused on common activities.

Gaps like this are inevitable, as the full spectrum of popular recreation in the time period is so broad a topic. But even with all the missing pieces and all the caveats, it is possible to come to some conclusions about the state of leisure. In his article *The Invention of Leisure in Early Modern Europe* Peter Burke states that leisure activities were becoming less marginal throughout the early modern period, based in part on the proliferation of the type of guidebooks that have been examined in this paper.⁷⁸ However, familiar recreational activities were already well established by the Middle Ages and probably earlier than even that,⁷⁹ making it difficult to accept Burke's argument completely. Even the guidebooks themselves repeatedly stress the ancient origins, however possibly fabricated or spurious, of their sports and games.⁸⁰

Part of the problem comes back to the definition of leisure, and whether or not the idea of leisure as such can even exist in early modern England; this is certainly something that needs to be examined further. Without getting into philosophy and intellectual history too deeply, however, it is easy to see that while recreational activities may not be more common in this period than they were in those previous, pastimes diversified

⁷⁶ Orme, 62-65.

⁷⁷ Suggett, 90.

⁷⁸ Burke, 144-146.

⁷⁹ Orme.

⁸⁰ Howlett.

greatly, and even some older ones changed in their intrinsic nature. In this way, “leisure” did become less marginal.

Part of this is because the most popular recreations of the medieval period in England were the festivals and celebrations of the Catholic Church. The forced conversion to Protestantism involved the discontinuation of many of these feast days and festivals.⁸¹ It would be interesting to see a study done on just how much this loss of traditional activities affected the rise of sports and games. The wakes are an interesting example of a church festival that survived, only to have its celebration primarily defined by the playing of games such as tennis.⁸²

But the major shift in the nature of recreational activities is in their changing levels of social function. Most of the games of the middle ages served a greater societal purpose than just leisure; they were close to military training.⁸³ This is most easily seen in the case of archery, which was seen as so important to the defense of the kingdom that laws were passed requiring it to be taught. By the end of the early modern period this aspect of the sport had faded away for obvious reasons, and the popularity of the sport along with it. But archery was still practiced, and because it was no longer mandated or necessary for the defense of the kingdom, it has in effect become a different type of activity altogether: the social function is gone, and in its place is an activity used (almost) purely as a pastime.

⁸¹ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

⁸² Suggett.

⁸³ Orme, 58-65.

This is not necessarily a new thing. Dicing is ancient at the very least and it is impossible to argue that it ever served a purpose in society, but the commonality of pastimes, of activities done just for fun, is something new, regardless of whether the people of the time would have thought of them as “leisure,” “idleness,” both or neither. The popularity of bowling, tennis, and board games testify to this; cards and card games, printed in such great numbers, are perhaps the best examples of all.

What this leaves, then, is a picture of the populace of early modern England that includes a wide variety of available recreations, many of which are shared with the aristocratic “leisure class.” Although still a long ways off from the point where the idea of leisure itself can conclusively be stated as existent, and further still from where leisure became recognized as an important part of everyone’s lives, the population was not doomed to boredom and tediousness in their non-working moments.

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