

Lockdown suggestions for entertainment from medieval England

Gavin Holman, 13 May 2020

In 1810 Joseph Strutt published his *Sports and Pastimes of the People of England*, in which he expounded on their rich history across the ages. Accompanying his text were numerous engravings from 13th and 14th century depictions of the various activities. These included “rural exercises practised by persons of rank” – hunting, hawking, horse racing; “general rural exercises” – e.g. archery, slinging, wrestling, ball games; “pastimes exercised in towns or nearby” – e.g. tournaments, plays, dancing, minstrels, bowling; and “domestic amusements” – e.g. music, sedentary games; children’s games.



The following are brief extracts from Strutt’s descriptions of some of these that you may find of use in your attempts to stave off the boredom of lockdown and isolation during the Covid-19 pandemic. Any equipment or props required can easily be made or repurposed using household or garden items.

Shuttlecock

It appears to have been a fashionable pastime, among grown persons, in the reign of James the First, and is mentioned as such in an old comedy of that time, wherein it is said “*To play at shuttle-cock methinkes is the game now*”. And among the anecdotes related of Prince Henry, son to James the First, is the following: “*His highness, playing at shittle-cock, with one farr taller than himself, and hittyng him by chance with the shittle-cock upon the forehead, ‘This is’, quoth he, ‘the encounter of David with Goliath’*”.

[Note: although it appears to be similar to today’s Badminton, the illustration indicates it can be played with an old carrot top and two empty bottles of wine – you don’t even need a net]



Shuttle-cock

Club Kayles

Also written *cayles* or *keiles*, derives from the French *quilles*. It was played with pins of an uncertain number, one of which is a king-pin – larger than the others. The object of the game was to throw a club, cudgel or stick to knock the pins down. The game of *cloish* or *clossh*, seems to have been the same as *kayles* except the pins were thrown at with a bowl rather than a truncheon.

[Note: the “bowl” above is probably a “ball” (as in bowling) but, to be honest you can throw anything at the “pins”, the end effect being the same. The second image below seems to depict a local wizard who is using his wand to knock over the pins – it is not known if this was an acceptable practice at the time]



Club Kayles

Bowling

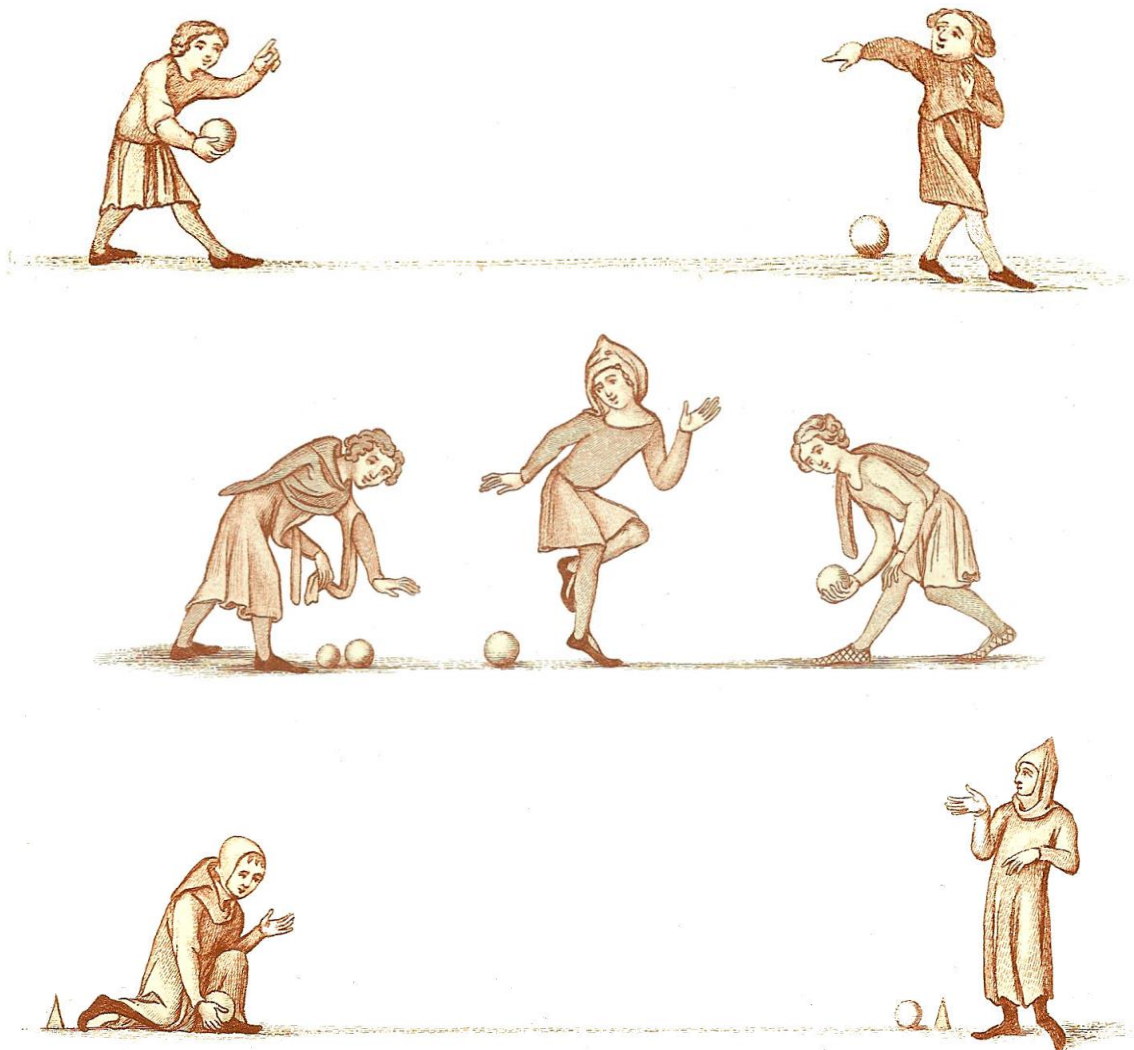
The pastime of bowling, whether practiced upon open greens, or in bowling-alleys, was probably an invention of the middle ages, having been traced back to the 13th century. The object in all variations seems to be to place the bowl nearest to the mark, in whatever fashion that may be. Part of a poem “*A Parallel betwixt Bowling and Preferment*”:

*Preferment, like a game at boules, to feed our hope hath divers play;
Heere quick it runs, there soft it rouses; the betters make and shew the way
On upper ground, so great allies doe many cast on their desire;
Some up are thrust and forc'd to rises, when those are stopt that would aspire*

The inconveniency to which the open greens for bowling were necessarily obnoxious suggested the idea of making bowling alleys which, being covered over, might be used when the weather would not permit the pursuit of the pastime abroad. It appears though, that soon after their introduction, they were productive of very evil

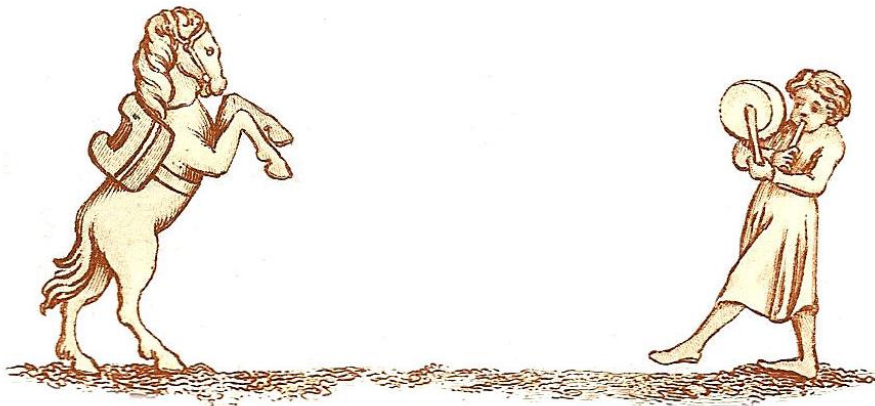
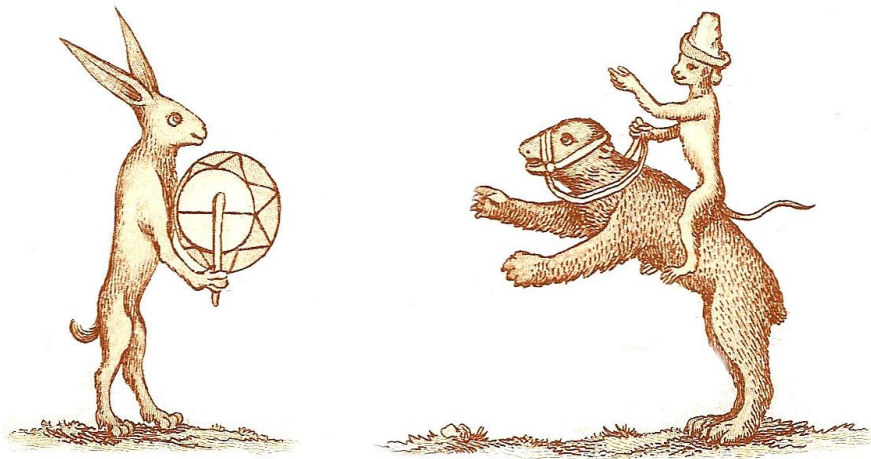
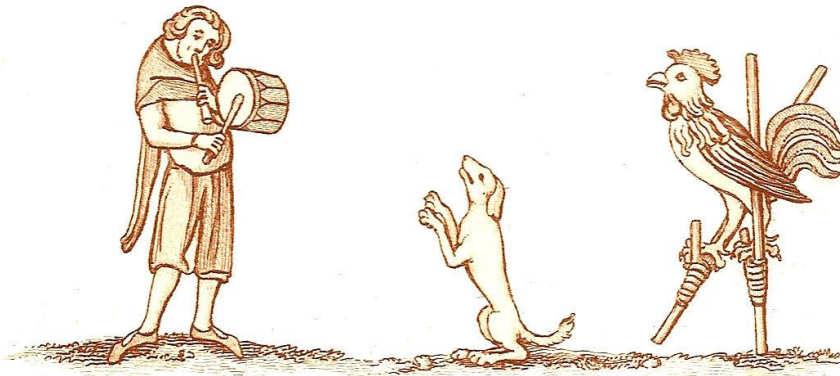
consequences; for they became not only exceedingly numerous, but were often attached to places of public resort, which rendered them receptacles of idle and dissolute persons, and were the means of promoting a pernicious spirit of gambling among the younger and most unwary part of the community.

[Note: the first illustration shows the variation where one player drops his bowl and the other has to either hit him or his bowl. The second illustrates the three-player option with both bowlers aiming at the central person, who has to leap into the air (balletically) to avoid the bowls. The third is obviously a specialist variant played between two alchemists (or mathematicians as they are known today) – where the bowls have to be “round solids”, spheres, cones, cylinders – an even more special version uses the five Platonic solids as thrown items]



Tutored animals

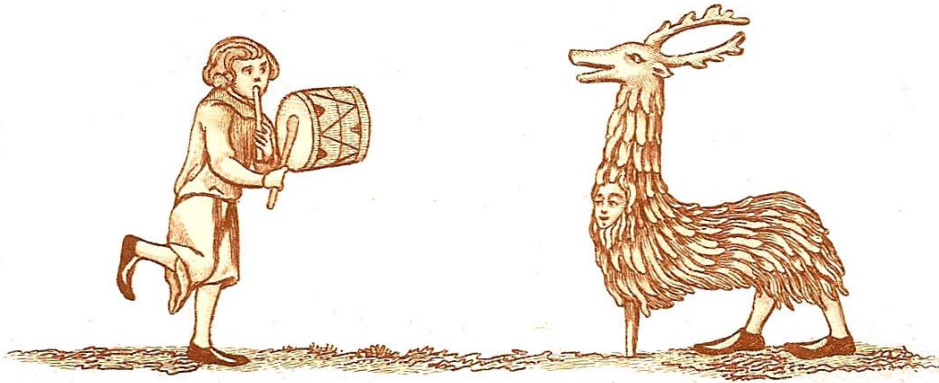
One great part of the jocolator’s profession was the teaching of bears, apes, horses, dogs, and other animals, to imitate the actions of men, to tumble, to dance, and to perform a variety of tricks contrary to their nature.



[Note: most people, sadly, will not have access to bears, monkeys, horses, hares and other animals to attempt to train them for useful or entertaining purposes, so you will have to make do with whatever is at hand. If you have a dog, then half the battle is over, as they are very amenable to learning new tricks – even old dogs. If you have a cat, however, forget it – all they will do is look at you with an appropriate level of disdain whenever you try any training exercise. In the absence of either of these common household animals, try your hand at what you can find – friendly spiders, your daughter’s goldfish, etc. Be warned, results may vary]

Animals imitated

Among performances dependent on imitation, that of assuming the forms of different animals, and counterfeiting their gestures, do not seem to have originated with the jugglers and jocolators, rather hailing from a sport common with the ancients, as part of the feast of Saturn, where the actors took upon themselves the resemblance of wild beasts, or domestic cattle, and wandered about from one place to another. In the middle ages such mummings were very common, and at court as well as in the mansions of the nobility, it frequently happened that the whole company appeared in borrowed characters.



[Note: the scope for animal imitation is endless, whether dressing up as a deer (presumably the actor above could only find one stick to act as a leg), a goat listening to a bell-ringer, or a dog delivering a roll of rare toilet paper to his master. Let your imagination guide you and make full use of all of the materials available in your isolation]

Tumbling

Among the pastimes exhibited for the amusement of queen Elizabeth at Kenilworth castle, there were shewn, before her highness, surprising feats of agility, by an Italian, “in goings, turnings, tumblings, castings, hops, jumps, leaps, skips, springs, gambauds, somersaults, caprettings, and flights, forward, backward, sideways, downward, upward, and with sundry windings, gyrings and circulflections”.

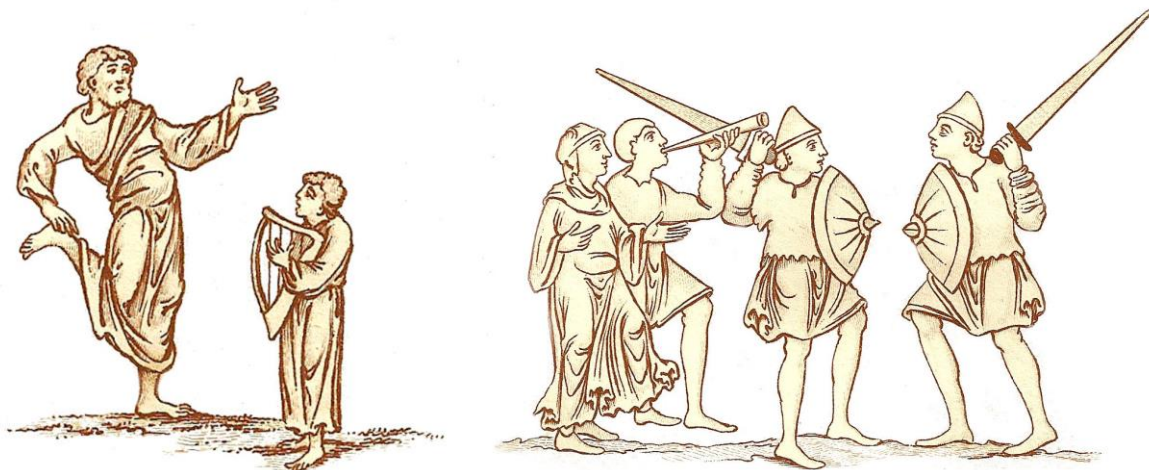
[**Note:** it should be pointed out that attempting these in the contemporary domestic environment should only be undertaken under the guidance of a trained expert – e.g. the Green Goddess - via a suitably distanced video link, and also in a location suitable to the extended physical gyrations to be expected – i.e. your garden. Bear also in mind that you could end up shaped like the first illustration below]



Dancing

The exhibition of dancing for the entertainment of princes and nobles on occasions of festivity is of high antiquity. Many types of dance were common among the peoples of the land, from the highest to the lowest born.

[**Note:** dancing is an ideal activity for those in lockdown – many different styles and can be carried out singly, with isolation partners, or groupwise across video links. The second image below seems to portray Cossack-style dancing; the third is a rare instance of the Irish stork dance, where the participant dances on one leg to the refrain of a harp; the fourth shows an early manifestation of the Morris dance where music is played while mock dance battles take place]

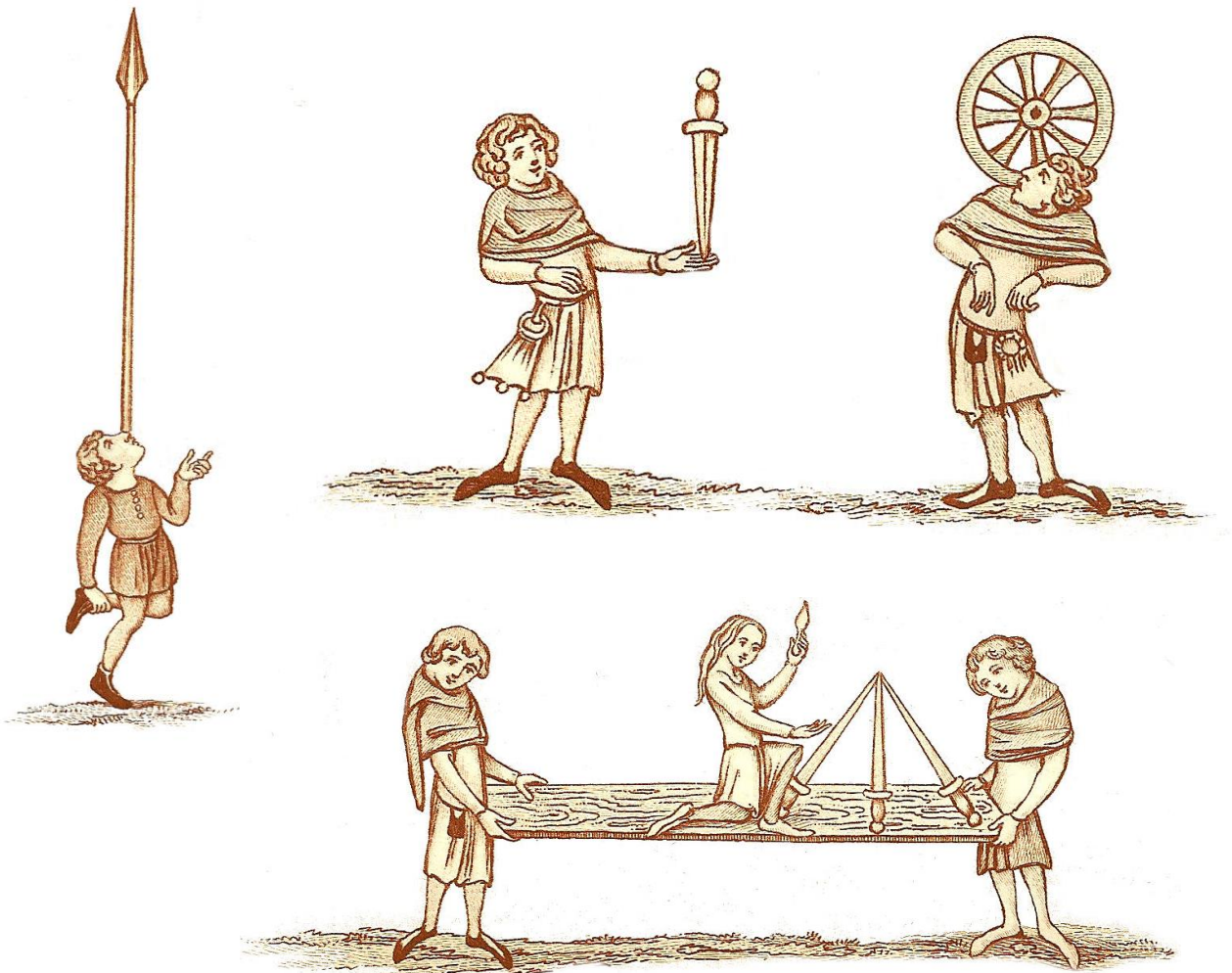


Balancing

In the Romance of the Rose, we read of Tymbesteres, or balance-mistresses, who played upon the tymbres, or timbrels, and, occasionally tossing them into the air, caught them again upon one finger.

*There was manye a tymbestere – couthe her crafte full parfytly;
The tymbres up full subtelly they cast, and hent full ofte
Upon a finger fayre and softe, that they fayled never more.*

Below we have some instances of the balance-master's art.



[Note: it should be self-evident that attempting such balancing acts - which can, of course, be carried out with virtually any item(s) that one can support – must be undertaken with caution, particularly when using swords or spears or similar pointy objects. Secondly I must point out that while balancing is an ideal occupation for the solitary self-isolator, the third example above does not conform to social distancing guidelines, unless you extend the balancing plank by at least twelve feet]