

## **London Skittles. A Lost Recreation.**

London or Old English skittles is an old game allied to many other similar games from different parts of the world that can be shown to date back thousands of years.

A simple definition of the game of skittles would be almost any game where an object is thrown at another object or group of objects with the intention of knocking it/them down.

As with many games it is difficult to accurately determine its origins and there has inevitably been, and continues to be, much speculation surrounding the background to this basic and simple recreation.

Of the three distinct games played in this country the two best supported, with established leagues, are West Country skittles and Long Alley skittles and these can best be found throughout the Southwest of England and the Midlands respectively.

London skittles, whilst being the most robust of the English games, with the largest and heaviest pins and cheeses, is sadly, now the most threatened.

The variation between the three games lies mainly in the shape of the pins used, the cheese or ball thrown, and the dimensions of the alley.

On one hand there are the tall, slim, Long Alley pins, on the other the usually symmetrical west country skittle pins and finally the large heavily rounded London pins that if hit in the right place, can topple end over end several times and even in a direction at right angles to the thrower.

The west country ball of wood or rubber bowled, as in ten pin, along the ground, the small barrel shaped cheese favoured in long alley which is usually bounced just before hitting the front pin, or the ten pound London monster, a fat discus shaped projectile, hurled at full toss, a distance of twenty one feet, to smite the leading pin 'on the full'.

Discussions about the merits or otherwise of the three games, will nearly always take account of the two dimensional aspect of some as compared to the three dimensional difficulties of others. Whilst there are scoring differences in each area they are not particularly pertinent as it is possible to play each of the three games with the scoring system used by the others.

(Ten pin bowling, which I'll only mention this once, is considered to be a sanitised, commercial, and far simpler game than any of the games from which it descended, and is clearly a two dimensional game.)

The London skittles clubs, as with skittles elsewhere in the country, depended upon a close relationship with the public house landlords and their local breweries. Without the provision of space within the pubs, or the grounds of the pubs, it is doubtful the game would have had the following it achieved..

Beer and skittles became synonymous, and although there were some famous examples of tee total champions, the general rule seemed to have favoured foaming pints and a hearty robust game of skittles, whether it was in the west country, the midland shires, or the home counties.

In 1773 a request was made to all publicans to: -

*'Adorn their grounds with every requisite advantage in order to encourage as much as possible this useful and salutary game.'*

### **The geographical spread**

Clubs and pubs affiliated to the Amateur Skittle Association (founded 1900) playing London skittles were to be found densely clustered in some areas and virtually non-existent in others. There were some seemingly isolated outposts, from Friern Barnet for example, in the north, to the most southerly pubs of Croydon.

They were also to be found along the line of the River Wey south westerly to Guildford and Old Woking. Many skittle clubs were established along the course of the River Thames from Ham and Thames Ditton right into London, with clusters occurring in Brentford, Mortlake, Barnes, Putney, Hammersmith and in Ealing just north of the Thames. It would appear that there were no ASA affiliated clubs in east London, and none to the northeast. There were clubs but they chose not to be tied into the regulated Association.

Working Men's Clubs were also participating members of the ASA, and they often referred to themselves as 'timber clubs' playing in 'skittle saloons'.

The geographical distribution of the London game generally suggested a close connection with the river Thames, its tributaries and navigations. There seems to be little evidence to support the theory that the game arrived on Dutch barges, apart from a few musings but there were always clusters of active pubs and clubs along the river, or at least certain parts of the river. It was equally possible that English sailors saw the game in the Low Countries and imitated it when they got home. (there is reference in Pepys to a shipboard game of ninepins, but obviously not in a heavy swell)

In the Croydon area there was a separate league known as The Croydon and District Amateur Skittles League. Their game was, to all extents and purposes, the same as the other London games, but had a slightly modified run up and delivery.

For every skittle alley found in close proximity to the Thames there were an equal number that could not claim the same association with river trade and activity. In Shepherd's Bush, Willesden, Hampstead, Somers Town and Islington, skittle alleys flourished and won silverware under the organisational fervour of the Amateur Skittle Association.

A booklet entitled 'The Story of Southgate's states; -

*'The sheds alongside the Mall between the inn and Selbourne Hall were there when the old footpath existed. They are used now as a lounge and a billiards room. The latter was formerly the inn smithy. Another and newer billiards room which has encroached upon the inn yard used to be an indoor skittle alley. There was originally an outdoor alley on the spot where Selbourne Hall now stands. The Cherry*

*tree used to be famous for its skittle clubs, and it is on record that these clubs won the junior and senior trophies in the same year.’<sup>1</sup>*

In another reference to the London game, J.Wentworth Day mentions the Black Lion at Hammersmith. This particular pub was well known as a ‘hot bed’ of London skittling activity, because of its successes in most of the major competitions at the time, but in particular for the participation of A.P.Herbert, author of a number of novels, including ‘The Water Gipsies’.

In this book Herbert gives a very accurate description of the game under the chapter titled ‘The Christmas Handicap’, and there are several other descriptions throughout the book, not only of the game of London skittles, but also of the public house named as ‘The Black Swan’, but which was, in reality, The Black Lion in Black Lion Lane, Hammersmith, Herbert’s local just yards from where he lived.

*‘They drove to The Black Swan where Mrs Higgins had prepared a ‘little luncheon’ in the skittle-alley: cold ham and chicken, a bowl of pickled onions, bread, cheese, two jugs of beer and one of lemonade. The skittle-alley, the largest room on the premises, was often used for festal occasions. The big horn – beam nine-pins at the far end looked strange in the day time, with a patch of sun on them and no electric light....*

*Mr Pewter explained to one of the Red youths the mysteries of skittle, and showed him Ernest’s name on the Roll of Fame. To win a place on the Roll of Fame a player must score three ‘floorers’ in succession. A ‘floorer’ knocks down all nine pins with one blow. Ernest name appeared twice on the Roll.’<sup>2</sup>*

Herbert was actively involved in the Amateur Skittle Association eventually becoming its President. He was also a Member of Parliament, a writer, journalist, TV personality and man of many other talents and was often invited to present the major trophies at the annual black tie dinners of the Association.

Wentworth Day also refers to the following pubs: -

*‘They play a pretty game- mark you with wooden ‘cheeses’ and not with balls as in the west country-at the Freemason’s Arms, Downshire Hill, Hampstead, at the Haven Arms, Haven Lane, Ealing, at The Duke’s Head, which is on the river front at Putney, at the not so far off Angel on the Portsmouth Road at Thames Ditton, and at The King’s Head, Kingston, and finally if you live northwards at The Orange Tree in Friern Barnet.’<sup>3</sup>*

Whilst researching the London game I have identified over two hundred pubs and clubs in the southeast that used to play London Skittles, many of which were ASA members. In addition there were

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Mason, ‘The Story of Southgate and other local essays’ Mayers Books and Co, Enfield 1948

<sup>2</sup> A.P.Herbert ‘The Water Gipsies’ Methuen 1930

<sup>3</sup> J. Wentworth Day, ‘The Inns of Sport’ Whitbread 1949

twelve or more teams that played in the Croydon League and a large number that remained independent.

Of all the public places recorded none now play London skittles with the exception of the Freemason's Arms in Hampstead, and, within the last few years the Norbury club which was formerly the private National Westminster Bank Club.

### **The decline of the London game**

A great number of public houses together with their skittle alleys were destroyed as a result of enemy action over London during the 'Blitz' and subsequent bombing raids. An equally large number were destroyed during the modifications that took place to town centres in the aftermath of the war.

(Kingston Town centre, for example, where a number of old public houses were demolished.)

The Silver Cup in Cromer Street, Kings Cross was one of two pubs, the other being The Golden Boot, in the same street that played the game. It was home to the Kings Cross Skittle Team who appeared on many of the championship trophies, winning a hat trick of London team titles between 1927 and 1929. More than half of Cromer Street including the Silver Cup disappeared under heavy bombing in 1942.

A description written in 1933 says of the pub: -

*'If you go into the saloon bar of the Silver Cup at Kings Cross you will see on the wall an illuminated 'Roll of Fame'. But it has nothing to do with the Great War. No ! These names so carefully inscribed and emblazoned are of those who in the skittle alley have in three successive throws hurled down all nine pins each time. It is the roll of fame of those who have scored 'triple floorers'; it goes back twenty years and is very extensive. Some there be who have scored double throws they knocked down nine pins every time.*

*At the back of the Silver Cup is the long alley of the King's cross Skittle Club, warmed half way along by an open coal fire, while photographs of skittle presidents and an old print add to the atmosphere. The print is dated 1725 and shows the gentl men of a coffee house engaged in the sport.'*

The reference to this print and the game being played in coffee houses is verified by further prints depicting the game being played in local places of recreation within a couple of miles of Kings Cross. At Copenhagen House in Islington there was an outdoor skittle ground as well as at the Bagnigge Wells Tavern and Tea Gardens and also at White Conduit House. Some of these premises were popular spas to which people went to take the waters as well as to partake of the various pastimes on offer.

The account of the Silver Cup goes on: -

*'Skittles is still quietly popular in London and there is intense local interest in the fight for the Dewar Shield, the Gore Trophy and the ASA Cup. The Black Lion of Hammersmith plays The Half Moon of Roehampton; the Silver Cup plays The Fox and Goose, the Hampstead Freemason's plays The Haven and so on.*

*A charabanc waits outside a public house about six of an evening and into it crowd a local skittle team and all their friends and backers go off and play a rival club at a public house in a different part of London,'*

The other pub in Cromer Street, The Golden Boot, is still open and had a skittle alley according a newspaper article dated 1835, but no evidence of it remains today, and it was never a member of the Association.

The Tufnell Park Hotel, which stood in Campdale Road, just off Tufnell Park Road, was another loss to enemy action. It was one of three licensed premises that have stood on this site, the first being The Tufnell Park Arms, which was replaced about 1888 by The Tufnell Park Hotel. This building was destroyed on 29<sup>th</sup> October 1940 by German bombing and was replaced by the present construction known as The Tufnell Park Tavern. The alley was not replaced and Islington lost one of its very few skittle alleys and the home of the Dewar Shield championship wining team of 1934/35.

The decline and destruction of public houses and the closure of their recreational amenities continued apace after the Second World War. The introduction of newer games, pool tables, pin ball machines, the premium on space in the capital and the conversion of many alleys into either extra drinking or eating spaces soon saw the demise of the game quicken. A recreation that required several months to learn effectively, that required physical energy, resulted in dirty hands, and that did not provide instant gratification began to lose ground to the newer, quicker electronic games that gave instant cash rewards or that took up less space in crowded pubs.

The loss of the Regency team from a Working Men's Club in Willesden owed much to post war changes in equality. A group of determined women, the wives of long standing members, claimed their rights within the premises, and took over the skittle alley for their own activities on an evening when the all-male team was playing away. The men never managed to regain the use of their alley. This story is a partiular example equal opportunities at the time in respect to women's rights, but it could also be considered to be a sad loss of an active and successful, albeit all male, skittle club.

### **Hampstead Lawn Billiard and Skittle Club- the history of a sole survivor.**

The longest surviving public skittle alley where the traditional London game is still to be found is in the basement of the Freemasons Arms, Downshire Hill, Hampstead.

There was probably an alley associated with the pub upon its completion in 1819, the date the pub first appears in the rate books. It was around the same time that most of the houses on Downshire Hill were built as well as St John's proprietary Chapel.

An early picture of the pub dated 1831 shows a square built structure standing on the corner of Willow Road and Downshire Hill. There are no buildings to the rear of the public house giving a view through to Rosslyn Hill.

The scene was described thus in 1919-

*'Downshire Hill and Keats Grove were pot-holed roads, with many large trees in the verges and flanked by houses which for the most part were rather shabby with peeling stucco and fading paint. St John's Church was battleship grey; the Freemason's Arms was a smallish box of a building covered with creeper, and surrounded by a collection of ramshackle sheds, which probably served as farm buildings, but then served for a tea or beer garden which came to full life on Bank Holidays.'*<sup>4</sup>

It was in one of these sheds or outhouses that the Freemason's skittle alley was first located.

A number of photographs exist of both the alley and the public house that date from the 1890's and are in the possession of the granddaughters of William Hill who was landlord in the 1920's. His father Rowland Hill is recorded in the Hampstead Register of 1865 as being the landlord of the Freemason's at that time, and it would appear that there was an alley even before that date. Throughout most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the premises were known as the Freemason's Tavern.

William and his father Rowland were not only landlords but carried on a variety of other business from the Freemason's including the hiring out of bicycles, charabancs, broughams, victorias and landaus for use on Hampstead Heath and for travelling to and from the theatre and railway stations. A small omnibus was also available for hire from the Freemason's yard and the business was known as the Hampstead Carriage and Motor Depot. Motor vehicles cost 10/6 pence per hour whilst horse drawn carriages were 3/6 pence per hour. These prices were for the year 1874. Painting, enamelling and 'repairs of any description' were also on offer as well as the stabling of horses. It is also probable that there was a blacksmith either on site or nearby. Running the public house was an extensive business.

In the late 1920's and early 1930's it became apparent that work was needed to refurbish the building and in 1932 work commenced, soon to be halted by the discovery of major structural problems in the basement area of the pub. The original building had been constructed over a tributary of the River Fleet and in time this had washed away the foundations. Refurbishment was abandoned for rebuilding and a new public house was constructed on the same site but not strictly in exactly the same place. The new building was set back some twenty feet from the road, further up the hill, and was completed in 1935. Both buildings existed next door to each other for many months before the older unstable building was knocked down in 1937.

On the instructions of the landlord at the time, Mr Bernard Levy, the skittle alley was brought in from the outhouse and placed in the basement of the new building in a specially constructed concrete tank. The official opening of the new alley took place on 9<sup>th</sup> November 1936 when a friendly match was played against the Tufnell Park Hotel team. In the period of rebuilding the Hampstead skittle team played all its matches in venues away from home, a necessity forced upon the team several times later in the same century as a result of flooding.

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<sup>4</sup> G.W.Potter- 'Random recollections of Hampstead' Eyre and Spottiswood

In 'The Story of Hampstead' the following is written: -

*'The Freemason's Arms replaced an inn which had a livery and bait stables attached. Riding on the Heath was very popular once. The rebuilders made a good job of the Freemason's and the present is a very handsome building with and without. The bar still displays a complete set of beer measures made of copper and of considerable age. In recent years the Freemason's Arms has become well known as a meeting place for the 'Hampstead Parliament' and 'Brains Trust'. A cycling club dating from the days of the penny farthing bicycle is still in being, and the skittle alley has been a feature of Hampstead for almost as long as the ancient game of Pael Mael which is played there. The Freemason's Arms has the distinction of being the only inn in England where the game is played at the present time.'*<sup>5</sup>

Despite the temporary loss of their skittle alley the Hampstead Club continued to build on its early successes under the umbrella of the Amateur Skittle Association. During the 1930's they had started to impose themselves on the world of London skittles by winning the Dewar Shield in 1931. This had followed minor triumphs in the Holway Cup in 1922 and by claiming the London Individual title through Arthur Makein in 1927.

The basis on which the Dewar Shield was played meant that teams from different areas of London played within an allotted division until one team became divisional champion. There were three main divisions and the winners from each then 'played off' in the month of April each year to decide the champion London team. Hampstead continued winning this trophy intermittently until the 1950's when they won it three times in a row between 1957 and 1959.

By this time however the decline in the game was becoming apparent. Clubs and pubs were closing all over the Southeast of England and the number of teams entering the ASA's many competitions was falling. By the early 1960's the Amateur Skittle Association was almost moribund and the clubs that remained, whilst still continuing to pay against each other, feared for their futures.

In October 1963 two famous clubs closed within ten days of each other. The Duke's Head Skittle Club and the Thames Ditton Skittle Club both issued letters to the remaining clubs and their members regretting their demise. This left 'The Haven' in Ealing, 'The Regency' in Willesden, 'The Black Lion' in Hammersmith and 'The Freemason's Arms' in Hampstead as the final upholders of the game in London... or so it seemed.

At the time of the inception of the Amateur Skittle Association in 1900 it was always appreciated that only clubs willing to abide by a strict sets of rules and regulations would want to become members. Those members would then benefit from active participation in all the competitions on offer through that organisation. Not everybody joined however, and by the 1960's with the demise of many of the ASA teams it became apparent that there were still at least two teams who had never signed up to the ASA conditions. These were 'The Aquatics Skittle Club', which had also been based in The Duke's Head, Putney sharing the facilities with 'The Duke's Head' team and 'The National Westminster Bank

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<sup>5</sup> J.H.Preston 'The Story of Hampstead.' Staples Press 1948

Skittle Club' based in Norbury. They had continued to play in leagues outside the ASA including, in the case of the Bank team, probable participation in the Croydon and District Amateur Skittles League.

Sense prevailed and the survivors, despite their past differences, huddled together for warmth and mutual support. By the early 1980's only three teams were left including the two non-Amateur Skittle Association members and the final ASA member 'The Hampstead Lawn Billiard and Skittle Club'. (Lawn Billiards was another pastime that was unique to the Freemason's Arms)

At the time of writing there are currently two venues in the London region where the game of London or Old English Skittles can be seen and played. The Norbury Club formerly the private 'National Westminster Bank Skittles Club' in Turle Road, Norbury, and the last public alley still based in the Freemason's Arms, Downshire Hill, Hampstead..

In a sentiment expressed over half a century ago J. Wentworth Day clearly indicated his feeling on the subject, and one with which I agree.

*'Landlords of all these inns deserve every support for they are trying to revive one of the oldest of Old English games. All good luck to them. There were thirty skittle clubs or more in London twenty five years ago, (1949) but practically all have died out. Anyone who attempts therefore, to reintroduce 'beer and skittles' into the grim humours and economic unpleasantness of a world that has lost its balance deserves a pilgrimage to his doorstep and posterity to his premises'<sup>6</sup>.*

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This article is an extract taken from a research paper entitled,

'The London Game- a history of Old English Skittles'

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I'd be very happy to discuss anything mentioned in this article and if any other members have information they may think will be of interest please contact me.

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<sup>6</sup> J. Wentworth Day, 'Inns of Sport'- Whitbread 1949