

'life isn't all beer and skittles, but beer and skittles or something of the same sort, must form a good part of every Englishman's education' Thomas Hughes in *Tom Brown's School Days* 1857

Played at the Pub

facts and figures on the pub games of Britain

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- There are over 50,000 pubs in Britain, but they are closing at the rate of about 6 – 7 every day. Some publicans and breweries argue that pub games help to build a loyal clientele. Others have got rid of their games, turning skittle alleys into bars or restaurants, and bowling greens into beer gardens or car parks.
- Britain's favourite pub game, played at just over half the pubs in the country, is darts, which in 2005 was finally recognised as a bona fide sport by the combined sports councils of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.
- The most common dartboard is the 'London trebles' board. This became standard in the 1920s, but a few regional boards still survive. In Manchester, the traditional 'log end' boards are only ten inches in diameter and have to be kept soaking in water between matches.
- In the late Victorian and Edwardian eras, most darts used in Britain were imported from a small village in northern France. The world's first modern darts were developed in 1930s London by a Hungarian refugee who chanced upon the game in a village pub whilst on holiday in Devon.
- Second only to darts are pub quizzes, staged at 44 per cent of all pubs. The oldest and largest league in Britain is the Merseyside Quiz League, which started in Bootle in 1959. But the first recorded quiz league started at a working men's club in York in September 1946.
- Britain's third most popular pub game is pool, introduced to this country in the late 1960s. Although it is assumed to be an American import, most pool tables in British pubs are based on smaller, Australian, French and Italian models.
- Britain's fourth most popular pub game is skittles, particularly in the West Country and south Wales, where there are some 150 leagues and over a thousand alleys. Unlike darts, a largely 20th century phenomenon, skittles has been played in Britain since at least the 14th century. The Dorset Flop (*second from top, right*) is, however, a relatively recent development.
- Hundreds of varieties of skittles are played worldwide, but only three survive in Britain. In the 'long alley' game, centred upon the east Midlands, barrel shaped projectiles are often thrown over a tin sheet. In London, once a hotbed of 'Old English' skittles, only one pub alley survives, at the Freemason Arms, Hampstead.
- The first sporting organisation in Britain ever to require its member clubs to have floodlights was the Canterbury & District Bat and Trap League in Kent, in 1951 (four years before floodlights were sanctioned by the football authorities). There are still 80 pubs in Kent staging bat and trap, an early form of cricket.
- You can fire a small bore rifle in several pubs in Worcestershire and Wiltshire without being arrested. At the Lamb in Devizes the rifle range is a 39' long steel tube accessed via a porthole in the snug.
- Among the most endangered pub activities are pipe smoking contests. One of the last is at the Bull in Harpole, Northamptonshire, where such contests have been staged since at least 1856. Nowadays of course it takes place in the pub's garden.



A Manchester dartboard next to a London trebles



The Dorset Flop demonstrated in Taunton



Quoits in North Yorkshire



Table football, vintage 1955, in Manchester – a table once played on by Eric Cantona



Bar billiards in Lewes, East Sussex