

Games in pubs are as traditional as fish and chips, ranging in the past from live boxing to cock fighting.

Today, as **Andrew Don** discovers, they comprise – in the main – gentler pursuits that help position pubs at the heart of their communities

Making the right moves

Anyone who witnesses adults playing Ringing the Bull at the Tower Arms, in Brentwood, Essex, could be forgiven for thinking someone has been dishing out Mickey Finns.

The aim is to swing a ring, dangling from a rope, on to a hook. Historically, some pubs had a real bull's head on the wall and players tried to swing the ring onto a horn.

British Beer & Pub Association (BBPA) spokesman Neil Williams says games play to the strengths of pubs because “they reflect the simple pleasure of bringing people together to interact and have fun”.

He adds: “A pile of board games in a great community pub gives that warm and relaxed sense of a hugely sociable home-from-home.”

Pub games range from the more common Monopoly, chess, backgammon and dominoes to quirky pursuits such as Dwyle Flunking, sometimes spelt Dwile Flonking, in which a pole is used to launch a beer-soaked cloth at opponents, with the aim of giving them a wet slap in the face. Apparently a lot of drinking is involved.

They also include games of the sporting variety, such as darts, skittles in its many variants, table football and American pool.

Years ago large snooker tables were commonplace and, for the more space-limited, bar billiards.

James Masters, managing director of pub-games specialist Masters Games, says that some publicans are now even considering removing pool tables for space reasons.

Regional differences

Masters says different regions have their own pub favourites. Aunt Sally is “fantastically popular” in Oxfordshire. A dolly – a ball or skittle – is placed on a metal spike and players take it in

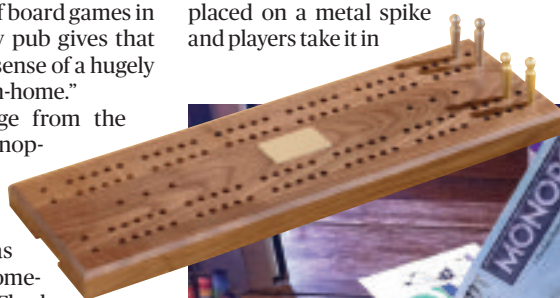


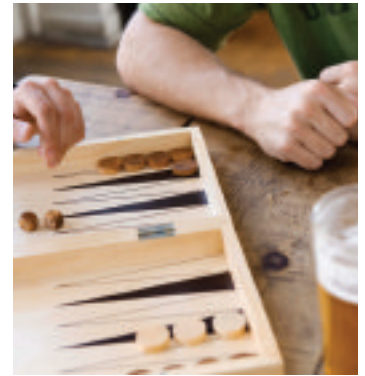
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the number of groups often playing Monopoly at once at the King's Head in Norfolk



Ace in the pack: cards, bar billiards, Monopoly and cribbage are common in pubs





Abiding by the rules

Playing for money can be tempting when downing a few pints in convivial company. But licensees must keep a watchful eye on who is doing what under their noses if they do not want to fall foul of the Gambling Act 2005. Nick Arron, partner at legal firm Poppleston Allen, says limited stakes can be placed on “equal-chance games” in pubs – gaming without a bank, such

as poker, bingo, bridge and whist. A person may not stake more than £5 on any one game with the exception of cribbage or dominoes where this limit does not apply. Further details including restrictions on prizes are in the Gambling Commission’s code of practice for equal chance gaming in clubs and premises with an alcohol licence (gamblingcommission.gov.uk).

Sociable pursuits: enjoyable games such as Aunt Sally (left) and skittles (below) can help people interact in the pub

turns to throw six sticks with the aim of knocking the dolly off, without hitting the spike.

Bat and trap, a forerunner to cricket, is played in Kent, steel quoits in Northumbria and indoor pub quoits in the Welsh Borders, Masters adds.

Rachel Wyatt, marketing manager of Coiledspring Games, points to the Royal Union in Cheltenham and the Ribs of Beef in Norwich, which hold games nights at which players bring along their own selection and “camp out for the evening”.

The Freemasons Arms, in Hampstead, north-west London, is reputed to be the only place where London skittles, or Old English skittles, is now played – in the cellar.

The game is played with a cheese that is thrown, rather than rolled, at the pins.

Matthew Oreschnick, the pub manager, says the pub benefits from extra food and drinks trade when parties of 10 to 20 – but sometimes up to 40 – including spectators, turn up.

Practicalities

The 64,000 dollar posser for pubs that offer traditional board games is whether a group playing a two-hour game of Monopoly is more profitable than a quicker punter turnover.

Charlie Campbell, who owns the King’s Head, in Great Bircham, Norfolk, sometimes has 10 groups playing Monopoly at once. He says: “They do buy more drinks and food.”

The pub is large so there is room

for more transient traffic as well as long-stay game players, so it gets the best of both types of trade.

“People treat the games respectfully but when we have to buy replacements we purchase them on ebay. It doesn’t cost a lot,” Campbell says.

Masters says pub games are addictive and people keep want to coming

“ Games reflect the simple pleasure of bringing people together to have fun

back to play them and get other people involved.

They need promotion, however, and staff should encourage customers to have a go. “Get them out when you know lots of the locals are around. Once they do, people become enthusiastic.”

The BBPA’s website describes Conga Cuddling, comprising a five-foot eel that knocks over a human skittle, and Rhubarb Thrashing, in which two blindfolded contestants stand in dustbins and do battle with rhubarb.

Perhaps not to everyone’s taste and newcomers to the games scene might be advised to start with something less risky.



Game on: Ringing the Bull at the Tower Arms in Brentwood (left), table football and shove ha’penny (right)