

STEEL QUILTS IN SUFFOLK

David Elisha Davy, writing around 1800, mentioned the game being played in Suffolk. He compiled many voluminous manuscripts, now in the British Library, preparatory to writing a history of the county, which he never began. He recorded that in Boyton, a village between Woodbridge and Orford in the Suffolk Sandlings, working people played the game on summer evenings. He missed the point somewhat in comparing it with throwing the discus, as if distance was the criterion for winning. It must have been played in earlier centuries, indeed in the 15th century a miracle was attributed to St. Osmund of Salisbury when a girl recovered from being struck on the head by a carelessly thrown quoit, the offender having sought sanctuary and the aid of the saint in the cathedral. It was one of those ancient games that had the distinction of being banned because its popularity kept men from archery practice.

The game has a basic quality that is rooted in the timeless earthy activities of the village, and its elements are steel, clay, sand and water. The quoits, which weigh up to 7¼ lbs a pair, are pitched 18 yards on to a bed of clay, kept soft by water. A circle of 36 inches diameter is drawn in the clay and quoits must land entirely within the circle to count. Beds are raised at the far end to assist visibility. The sticky clay is removed by means of rubbing the quoit with a cloth in sharp sand, or today, often in sawdust. The best clay contains some sand mixed with it, and this can be obtained from brick kilns where bricks have not formed properly in the mould and are therefore discarded before firing. In the days before tractors, horsemen would tie their quoits to the plough and drag them through the sandy soil of east Suffolk to keep them shiny and rust free. Boys began playing using special horseshoes made by the local blacksmith. They were circular and their original purpose was to protect the horse's 'frog', a horny, elastic pad in the centre of the hoof which sometimes became infected. Later, when men, and to aid proficiency, they set up a string in the garden at the height needed to pitch a quoit into a bucket, and thus perfected their game.

The target is a steel pin, with an indentation in the centre, buried just below the level of the clay, which cannot be seen at 18 yards, so a piece of paper, called a light, is placed upon it. Sometimes a white feather served the same purpose. The quoits are dished on one side and curved on the other. They must lie flat on the bed or incline in such a way that the curved side is uppermost. Should a quoit incline with the dished side on top, this is called a 'woman' and is removed. A spirit level, mounted on a 'stem' enables a nearly upright quoit to be checked. This tool is also used to check whether a ringer has been scored. Two points are awarded for every ringer, and the level, its end placed within the indentation on top of the pin, will reveal whether the quoit is genuinely encircling the pin in doubtful cases. Ringers are removed from the bed before the next quoit is pitched, but a quoit encircling the pin, but with a "cover" beneath it, does not count as a ringer. A cover is a quoit that has a part of the pin beneath it. The scoring, apart from ringers, is as in bowls and the winning quoit or quoits can be checked by means of a pair of compasses. The surrounding clay can be removed if necessary.

Obviously some maintenance of the beds and the grounds must take place. Until recently players stood on grass, and often made a mark with a quoit to indicate where to stand.