

BEYOND THE BULLSEYE

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The Untold History and Living Culture of Darts

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A Note on Evidence

Darts has an unusually rich folklore. Stories repeated for decades are sometimes presented with exact names and dates even though no contemporary evidence has been located. This book distinguishes documented fact from reasonable interpretation, later recollection and legend. Where certainty is impossible, uncertainty is part of the story rather than a gap to be disguised.

Part I - Before the Standard Board

Chapter 1 - Before Darts Had a Name

Every modern player recognises the ritual. The board is fixed at its measured height. The throwing line establishes the permitted distance. Three darts rest in the hand. The player looks towards twenty narrow numbered segments arranged in a pattern so familiar that it can seem permanent.

It is not permanent. It is the result of choices.

The board, the numbers, the materials and even the line from which we throw all have histories. They were not delivered together by a single inventor. They emerged at different times, in different places, for different reasons. Some changes solved practical problems. Others made competition easier to organise. A few became standard because influential manufacturers, leagues or governing bodies adopted them. Behind all of them were people, although their names were not always recorded.

This makes the first question - who invented darts? - both natural and misleading. It assumes that the game appeared as a complete invention. The surviving evidence points instead towards a gradual formation. Long before the organised sport was recognisable, people threw pointed objects. Long before a standard clock board existed, they aimed at marks and targets. These activities belong to the enormous human history of throwing. They

do not automatically belong to the direct history of modern darts.

That distinction matters.

A weapon is not yet a game

The English word *dart* is much older than the pub sport. For centuries it described a light pointed missile or weapon. Medieval and early-modern references to darts may therefore tell us about warfare, hunting or projectiles without telling us anything about a game played for scores. A historian cannot move from the existence of a dart-shaped weapon to the existence of darts as we know it without evidence connecting the two.

The temptation is obvious. A shortened arrow resembles an early dart. The circular end of a timber or barrel resembles a target. Growth rings resemble scoring circles. Once those visual similarities are noticed, a complete origin story almost writes itself: soldiers shelter indoors, shorten their arrows and throw them at a barrel end; cracks or tree rings become divisions; competition produces a scoring system; the pub game is born.

It is an excellent story. Excellence as a story is not evidence.

No contemporary medieval record has yet been identified that securely documents this neat chain of events. The absence of such a record does not prove that no soldier ever threw a shortened arrow for amusement. People improvise games, and most private moments leave no archive. What the absence does mean is that the incident cannot responsibly be presented as the known origin of modern darts.

In this book, possible is not another word for proven.

The problem with ancestors

Most sports can point to earlier activities that share one or more features with the modern game. Darts has many candidates: throwing weapons, archery targets, fairground attractions, blowpipe games and domestic target toys. The question is not simply which activity looks oldest. It is whether a line of transmission can be demonstrated.

Consider *Puff and Dart*, a game in which a small projectile was propelled through a tube towards a target. References from the early nineteenth century show that dart-like target amusements existed well before the organised pub sport of the twentieth century. Yet the method of propulsion is fundamentally different: the player blows rather than throws. Puff and Dart is important evidence for a market and appetite for indoor target games. It should not be silently relabelled as modern darts.

The same caution applies to archery. Concentric targets were familiar long before the standard dartboard. They demonstrate that graded circular scoring was not an extraordinary idea waiting for one unique inventor. But a resemblance between targets does not establish that one particular archery butt directly became the numbered dartboard.

Historical development is often untidy. Several traditions can contribute ideas without one being the sole ancestor. A fairground game may influence scoring and equipment; a parlour toy may help move target play indoors; pub competition may encourage local rules; manufacturers may make the equipment consistent

enough for leagues. Instead of seeking a single moment of birth, we need to watch separate strands come together.

When the language changes

Words provide firmer footholds than legends, although they also require care. The Oxford English Dictionary currently records evidence for the word *dartboard* in an 1853 issue of the *Bristol Mercury*. Its evidence for *dart* in the specific sense of a light pointed missile thrown at a target in the game dates from 1901.

These dates do not mean that a dartboard was invented in 1853 or that nobody played the game before 1901. Dictionaries document surviving usage, not the first private action. Earlier evidence may eventually be found. What these citations give us is something more modest and more valuable: secure points by which the language of the game had entered print.

The difference between the dates is revealing. A compound such as *dartboard* could refer to a target associated with various dart activities. By the opening years of the twentieth century, commercial and printed language was becoming easier to connect to the recognisable game. Catalogues, newspapers, rulebooks and advertisements gradually provide the kind of detail that origin legends lack.

This is where the historical ground becomes firmer.

Ordinary games leave quiet traces

The earliest decades are difficult to reconstruct partly because darts belonged to ordinary life. Governments preserve treaties and laws. Institutions preserve minutes when they believe their work matters. Families save

exceptional letters. A casual game in a public house may leave nothing unless it causes an advertisement, a complaint, a competition or a court case.

Equipment disappears too. Wooden boards split, dry out or are discarded. Darts bend and break. Paper targets are thrown away. Local rules can be understood by everyone in a room without being written down. When standardisation later succeeds, the older variations may appear strange and are easily forgotten.

The historian must therefore read indirect evidence. A manufacturer offering a target for sale proves that somebody expected a market. A newspaper announcing a match reveals vocabulary, place and organisation. A photograph can show the pattern of a board, although it must be dated carefully. A patent documents what an applicant claimed to have improved, but not necessarily what players adopted. A rulebook records an organisation's preferred practice, which may not yet have been universal.

No single source is enough. Together, sources begin to turn scattered play into a social history.

The fairground possibility

Research by darts historian Patrick Chaplin has argued that the English pub game is better understood through fairground and popular target-game culture than through unsupported medieval military tales. This interpretation has an important advantage: it directs attention towards the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where evidence for manufactured darts, numbered targets and commercial play becomes more substantial.

Fairgrounds rewarded a target that appeared simple but punished inaccuracy. That principle is written into the modern clock board. High values sit beside low ones: 20 is flanked by 1 and 5; 19 by 3 and 7. A near miss can be expensive. The arrangement converts control into arithmetic consequence.

This does not by itself prove that a particular fairground operator designed the modern sequence. Nor does it establish a single route from continental target games to every British regional board. It provides a researchable context. Manufacturers, travelling showpeople and local players could exchange equipment and ideas. French-made wooden darts have been identified in discussions of this trade, raising the possibility that an activity celebrated as deeply English was shaped by imported objects as well as domestic practice.

That possibility deserves evidence, not embarrassment. Sports cross borders. Equipment travels more easily than national myths admit.

Why invention stories survive

If the gradual explanation is stronger, why do single-inventor stories remain so attractive?

First, they are easy to repeat. A name and a year fit neatly in a quiz. Secondly, they make a familiar object feel designed rather than inherited. Thirdly, a lack of early documentation creates space into which confident stories can grow. Once a claim is printed, later writers often cite one another rather than returning to the original evidence. Repetition then begins to resemble confirmation.

The internet accelerates this process. Ten pages may carry almost identical wording, each appearing to support the others. If all ten descend from one unsourced account, they remain one unsupported tradition.

This is particularly important in the case of Brian Gamlin, frequently named as the Lancashire carpenter or showman who devised the board's number sequence in 1896. No satisfactory contemporary evidence has yet established the claim, and even Gamlin's identity has proved elusive. His story belongs in darts history because it became part of darts culture. It cannot be used as the uncomplicated answer to who invented the board.

Other candidates and regional traditions will appear in a later chapter, where the physical boards and number patterns can be compared. For now, Gamlin offers a warning: precision in a story - a full name, occupation, place and date - does not guarantee historical accuracy.

Beginning where the evidence begins

The responsible history of darts therefore starts with boundaries.

We can say that throwing games are ancient. We can say that the word *dart* once described weapons and missiles unrelated to the organised sport. We can identify nineteenth-century printed evidence for dartboards and other target amusements. We can investigate fairground, parlour and public-house contexts. We can watch the documentary record grow clearer around the turn of the twentieth century.

We cannot yet name a medieval soldier who invented darts. We cannot turn a plausible barrel into a documented first board. We cannot assign the complete

game to one creator simply because a later tradition does so.

For a player, this uncertainty does not diminish the sport. It makes the achievement of the modern game more remarkable. The rules and equipment we inherit were shaped through generations of use. What now feels natural had to become familiar. What now appears universal was once local.

When I stand at the oche, I do not need a legendary inventor to feel connected to the past. The connection is present in the act itself: a human hand, a chosen target and the hope that control can overcome distance. The history begins not at one dramatic moment, but wherever those elements started to become the game we recognise.

In the next chapter, we will meet the soldiers, monarchs and emigrants who populate the popular origin story. Their tales tell us a great deal about how darts has imagined its past. The harder question is whether they tell us what actually happened.

Chapter 2 - Soldiers, Kings and Other Good Stories

The traditional history of darts is crowded before the documented game has properly arrived. Archers shelter from rain. Soldiers shorten arrows. Royalists pass idle hours in Oxford. Anne Boleyn presents Henry VIII with a magnificent set. The Pilgrims carry darts across the Atlantic aboard the *Mayflower*. Each scene is vivid enough to illustrate. Together they create an unbroken adventure running from medieval England to the modern pub.

There is only one difficulty: the surviving evidence does not support that adventure.

This does not make the stories worthless. Legends reveal what later generations wanted the game to be: ancient, English, military, royal and ready to travel. They also show how easily the meaning of a word can shift when it is lifted out of its own century. A *dart* in a Tudor diplomatic report is not necessarily an object thrown at a numbered board. A weapon can become sporting equipment, but a historian must demonstrate that change rather than assume it.

Rain, boredom and the perfect origin

The soldier story comes in several forms. In one, medieval archers practise by throwing shortened arrows at the cross-section of a tree. In another, troops sheltering indoors use the bottom of a wine or ale barrel. A version