YORK ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST
finding the future

Games and Recreation c. AD1400-1700

An *Insight* Report

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1.   GAMES

Archaeological excavations in York have produced plenty of examples of medieval counters, playing pieces and dice used in board games, and also at least one gaming board used in a medieval game. The recovery of such equipment should not be surprising as there are numerous references to such recreational activities in medieval literature and records, which often exhibit contradictory stances on the morality of games, particularly amongst the clergy. Much of the playing equipment which has been found seems to have been simply made, sometimes recycling existing materials or objects. It seems almost anyone, at any level of society, could have got together what was needed to play 'Merrills' (or 'Merels') or 'Nine Men's Morris' as we know it today, which required only counters and a very basic board.

Chess

The game of chess first came to England in the 11th century, having originated several centuries earlier in India, from where it spread to Persia, arriving in Europe following the Moorish conquest of Spain. A sophisticated game, chess became popular with those members of society of higher status and greater learning, so it is perhaps unsurprising that only two chess pieces from the medieval period have been recovered from excavations by York Archaeological Trust. Both beautifully made of jet, these have been crafted with skill, and would surely have been part of a stunning chess set.

One of the pieces (from Tower Street) represents the rook, the name being taken from the original Persian name for the piece 'Rukh' which means 'chariot' and which is characterised by the V-shaped notch in the top.

Figure 1: *Jet chess piece from Tower Street*

It has been decorated with ring-and-dot motifs on the top and on the sides, where the ring motifs are linked by incised lines, all inlaid with tin. At some point, the function of the piece has changed, as it has been pierced, perhaps in order to become a pendant. Very similar jet rook pieces have been found during work on the former Coach and Horses Inn on Nessgate, York and also at Rievaulx Abbey. The other chess piece found at Union Terrace is clearly a knight, as the form of a horse is easily identifiable; it has also been decorated with ring-and-dot.

Figure 2: A line drawing of a knight chess piece from Union Terrace

The corresponding white pieces to these black pieces would probably have been made of bone or antler, or possibly ivory. Interestingly, both of these chess pieces were found on the sites of medieval friaries in York; the rook came from excavations on Tower Street, within the precinct of the Franciscan Friary, whilst the knight was found in the area of the Carmelite Friary on Union Terrace.

Many clerical writers in the medieval period seem to have had strong views on the playing of chess and other games, typically suggesting that they were an unwelcome distraction in a religious life. In 1303 clergyman Robert Manning warned in his confessional manual "Handlyng Synne" that restraint should be shown when playing for fear of completely forgetting one's daily responsibilities, citing in particular going to morning service in church. Another writer in the 15th century, upon hearing that a fellow monk might be about to leave the order, claimed to have had a vision in which '..I saw that many enemies came to bring you out of your order. Some of them delivered to you tennis balls, bows and arrows, tables, chess and other such harlotries' (Trinity College Dublin Manuscript 281). The writer clearly thought board games – amongst other attractions - could be considered a threat to devotion and were thus best avoided. The church also laid down rules, with both dice and chess banned for clergy by the Synod of Worcester in 1240, but these games were clearly tempting, as rulings sometimes had to be enforced using fines. At the College of the Vicars Choral in Bedern, York rules are recorded in 1420-1421 which forbade games of chess and draughts, betting, gambling and throwing dice in the hall under a penalty of 3s. 4d.

Merrills or Merels

Merrills (or Merels/Merelles/Marelles/Morelles) is the game known to us today as Nine Man's Morris, and appears to be known from at least as far back as the Roman period. It is a game of position for two players using nine counters or pieces each (the name 'merrill' or 'merel' comes from the Latin merellus meaning a token or counter).

A Nine Men's Morris board dating to the 10th century was found inscribed into the upper face of a coffin board placed over the burial of a child in the graveyard of St. Benet's Church during excavations on Swinegate. The board comprises three concentric squares connected by lines from the middle of each of the inner square's sides to the middle of the corresponding outer square's side. Although this board is earlier in date than the period we are looking at, the design would have been totally familiar to a 15th century resident of York playing the game.

Figure 3: A Nine Men's Morris board found during the Swinegate excavations

Each player would start with nine counters, and the aim of the game was to make "mills" which are vertical or horizontal lines of three counters in a row. Every time this was achieved, an opponent's piece would be removed, the idea being to reduce the number of opponent's pieces to less than three thus making them unable to play.

These boards have been discovered in all sorts of places, with almost any flat, level surface capable of being used as a base into which the grid or pattern needed for the game could be marked. Examples known include a 12th century stone at Wharram Percy, on a cask lid on board the ship 'Mary Rose' (which sank in July 1545), and on stone cloister benches in cathedrals including Gloucester and Salisbury. A wooden board was also found on the late 9th/10th century Gokstad ship in Norway.

Tables

The medieval game of 'Tables' would have been enjoyed by both sexes. Although it seems to have very ancient origins, the game is thought to have been introduced to Europe around the mid-11th century. Unlike chess, however, anyone who was able to afford a board and marker pieces could play. A set comprising a wooden board, counters and a leather cup for shaking the two (or sometimes three) dice was found in the Carpenters' cabin on board the

'Mary Rose'. The rules were similar to backgammon and it was not uncommon to see a board at a medieval feast.

No board has been found in York, but numerous counters and dice which could have been used and made of a variety of materials such as jet, stone, fired clay, bone, antler, ivory and wood have been recovered.

Dice

Two jet dice found at 16-22 Coppergate have ring-and-dot motifs representing the numbers, with these motifs being inlaid; one die with calcium carbonate and the other with tin.

Figure 4: Jet die inlaid with calcium carbonate

Figure 5: Jet die inlaid with tin

Dice of ivory were also found at Coppergate, but bone was more commonly used, as in examples found at Fishergate and Hungate. The conventional numbering system used on dice since the Roman period, and still in use today has the sum of all opposing faces adding up to seven i.e. one opposite six, two opposite five and three opposite four. But some dice from 13th – 16th century deposits in York have been found to use an alternative pattern with one opposite two, three opposite four and five opposite six. It is unclear why this different system would be used, but rolling such dice in a game would presumably produce a variation to the results expected from using dice with the normal arrangement.

Figure 6: Examples of dice made of jet, bone and ivory

One particularly unusual die from the site of a medieval foundry in Bedern has lozenge-shaped faces, but quite how – and if – it was used in gaming is uncertain.
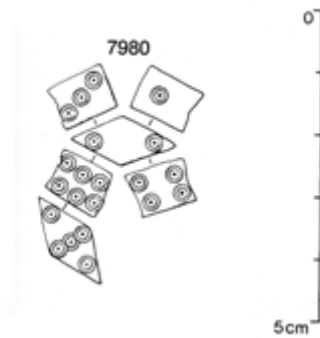

Figure 7: A drawing of an unusual shaped die found at Bedern

Counters

Figure 8: Examples of gaming counters made of fired clay, stone and bone

Many of the counters which have been recovered from excavations have been simply made, often chipped out of a fragment of stone, or ceramic roof tile or vessel fragment, and sometimes with the edges smoothed off, as in examples from Bedern. It is likely that some of these were made by players themselves as and when they required new pieces. More carefully crafted and decorated bone counters have been found at Coppergate and Hungate. Most of the counters seem a little large to have been used in Nine Men's Morris, but it is possible that some of them were used in that game.

Figure 9: Bone gaming counter found at Coppergate

Figure 10: Bone gaming counter found at Hungate

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2.   OTHER RECREATIONS

Bowling

Lawn bowling in Britain has a long history, with the earliest documented game being played in Southampton in 1299, where the earliest known bowling-green still survives. The first known covered-over bowling alley appears to have been established in London in 1455, and in the 16th century King Henry VIII added some in his building works at Whitehall alongside 'divers fair tennice-courts…and a cock-pit'. Although Henry VIII clearly enjoyed playing the game with his courtiers, he did not think it was a game for commoners, introducing a law in 1512 which stated that "no manner of Persons could at any time play at any Bowl or Bowls in Open Places out of his Garden or Orchard." A statutory fine of six shillings and eight pence had to be paid by those who broke the law; although it seems wealthy noblemen could obtain a licence if they wished to play.

This wooden bowling ball has been spindle-turned out of ash wood, and it was recovered from a 15th century deposit at 16-22 Coppergate. Unlike a modern bowling ball which has a smoothed curved profile, the shape of this ball is like a cylinder with rounded ends, and it has a flatter circumference; also, it does not have a deliberately created bias. Medieval bowling greens in York are recorded from a much later date than the ball itself. In the 17th century, several existed around the Minster, including one owned by Sir Arthur Ingram (whose family also owned Temple Newsam in Leeds), and another near the King's Manor, which was recorded as being the site of fighting during the 1644 Siege of York.

Figure 11: Wooden bowling ball found at Coppergate

Archery

Recycled leather shoe parts have been used to create this piece of archery equipment. It is an archer's bracer, used to protect the inside of an archer's forearm from the snap of the string when an arrow was fired. A cut down poulaine shoe sole of later 14th century date forms the guard while the strap with iron buckle may also derive from a shoe of the period.

The bracer was found in a late 14th – late 15th century deposit at 16-22 Coppergate amongst a large quantity of leather offcuts resulting from the repair and recycling of shoes.

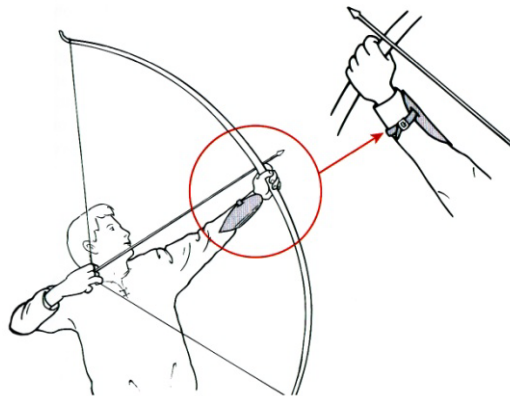*Figure 12: Leather archer's bracer made from recycled shoe parts*

Figure 13: A diagram showing how an archer's bracer was used

In the medieval period, archery was in fact considered to be a vital skill, rather than a recreation as we would consider it now, and laws making archery compulsory were enacted: for example, the Statute of Winchester was passed in 1285, which required all men with land worth more than 40 shillings to have in his house 'a sword, a bow, arrows and a knife'. In 1365 King Edward III, worried that there were not enough skilled archers to contribute to his wars, instructed the sheriffs of London that 'you cause public proclamation to be made, that every one of the said City, strong in body, at leisure times on holidays, use in their recreations bows and arrows, or pellets, or bolts, and learn and exercise the art of shooting'. At the same time he insisted that the same men of London 'do not after any manner apply themselves to the throwing of stones, wood, iron, hand-ball, foot-ball, bandy-ball, cambuck (a game in which a ball was propelled by a curved stick – perhaps like modern hockey or golf) or cock-fighting, nor such other vain plays, which have no profit in them, or concern themselves therein, under pain of imprisonment.'

Music

The physical evidence of music – and other 'noise - making' - from archaeological excavations in York ranges from very simply made one piece instruments to parts of more complex composite musical instruments. Apart from a couple of iron Jew's Harps, all the instruments and parts of instruments that have been recovered are made of bone or antler.

Figure 14: Iron Jew's Harp found at Bedern

Figure 15: Iron Jew's Harp found at St Andrewgate

One of the most numerous types is also the most simple, comprising a pig axial metapodial (trotter bone) with a central hole cut through the shaft. For many years these objects were identified as 'toggles', but they tend not to exhibit signs of wear that would be expected if they were handled daily. More recently, it has been noted that in parts of 20th century Scandinavia, similar bones had been used by children to create a loud buzzing noise, by passing a loop of cord through the perforation, stretching and winding it around, before pulling it tight to create the humming sound. These objects are now identified as 'buzz-bones', which appear to have been used only a few times before being discarded undamaged.

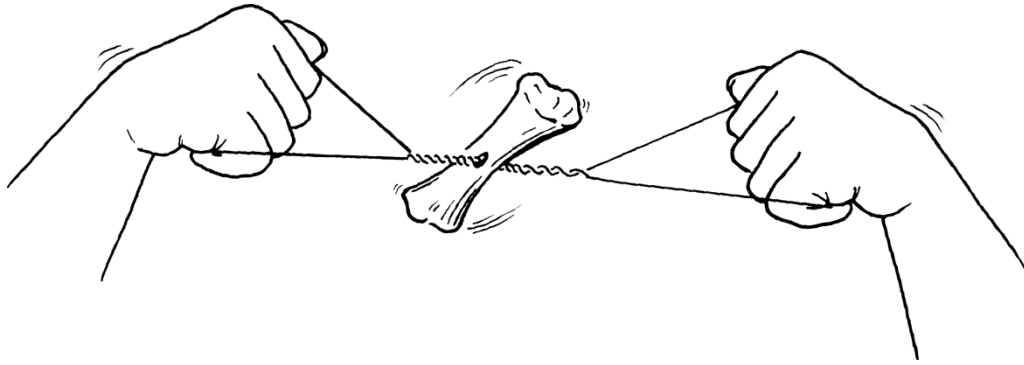*Figure 16: Buzz- bones' found at different sites in York*

Figure 17: A drawing showing how the 'buzz-bones' were used

Also very simple to make, bone whistles have been found at 16-22 Coppergate. These comprise naturally hollow bird bones with D-shaped blow holes, and a stop-hole at the other end with finger-holes between (now missing, the whistle would have had a fipple, or plug stopping the upper end of the pipe with a narrow slit through which the player would blow). The example seen here has been broken across the second finger-hole; a more complete whistle found at Coppergate had four finger holes and is on display in the JORVIK Viking Centre.

Figure 18: A whistle made of bone

Tuning pegs for stringed instruments such as harps, lyres or fiddles have been found primarily on or near ecclesiastical sites in York, including the Vicars Choral College, Bedern and the site of St. Mary's Hospital, Union Terrace.
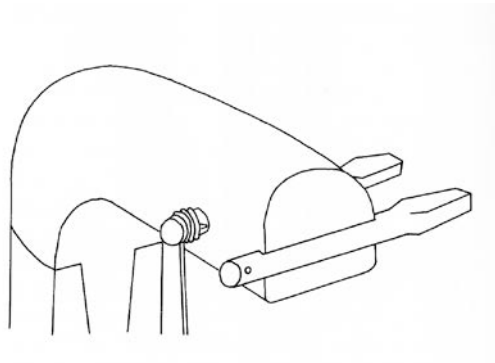

Figure 17: Reconstruction showing peg in harp

A possibly unfinished peg was also found in excavations at 1-5 Aldwark. These bone pegs (and one made of antler) have been made by hand and are almost all of a form which would have been turned with a key; they have squared heads, a shaft of circular or sub-circular section and a drilled perforation at the lower end through which the string passed. The exception is one peg found at Bedern, which has a more spatulate head that could have been moved by hand. Some of the pegs from the Vicars Choral show signs of repair. One of them has a broken perforation just below the existing hole and on a different orientation, while the head has been reshaped to accommodate this change in orientation.

Figure 20: Some of the tuning pegs found at Bedern

The possibly unfinished peg found at 1-5 Aldwark might point to an instrument maker's workshop in the area, which is close to the Vicars Choral College, where a total of 12 tuning pegs were found. As music was a fundamental part of the role of a Vicar Choral (who as a member of the minor clergy was employed primarily as an assistant or deputy to a canon or prebendary, and would perform their duties when required, including attending the services in the choir), it is perhaps not surprising that parts of stringed musical instruments should have been found within the College.

This series of *Insights* has been contributed by York Archaeological Trust staff members and external specialists for Finding the Future. They aim to frame an understanding of aspects of the Trust's collection of artefacts and their archaeological context; and also to enhance staff involvement. The authors represent a broad range of experience and knowledge.

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