



Today our choice of entertainment is varied - we have TVs, game consoles, radios, toys, books and board games. Five hundred years ago in Scotland people enjoyed themselves just as much as we do, but their choices were smaller.

What kind of games did children play?

Most children helped their families on the farms or with housework as soon as they could walk. They would still find time for games though. Some games you would recognize, like tig, hide and seek, football, spinning tops or skipping. Other games are no longer played, like hurley hacket. To play hurley hacket you needed a horse's skull and you would sledge down a hill in summer, sitting on the skull! King James V enjoyed playing hurley hacket on a hill outside Stirling.



What sports or games did rich people play?

The royal families and the nobility played sports which prepared them for battle and fighting. As well as archery, people took part in jousting tournaments. Here they tried to attack targets while on horseback. Hunting with dogs was a popular sport and so was hawking, where people trained birds of prey to attack other animals. The Royal family played a kind of tennis known as 'real' tennis and they also played golf. King James IV was a keen footballer and also enjoyed watching horse racing. Mary, Queen of Scots played billiards and backgammon as well as being a keen and competent horse rider.



What sports or games did ordinary people play?

Football was popular even then, but it was much wilder and rougher. It involved fewer rules and lots more people than today. Another popular activity was a game called 'caitch' - a kind of handball where a ball was thrown against a wall and caught, a bit like squash but without rackets. Wrestling and other games of strength were common too.

In parts of Scotland the Highland game of shinty was played - a game similar to hockey. In winter time, if the lochs and rivers froze, people played versions of curling and also enjoyed skating using the shin bones of animals as skates! Many of these sports were played by women as well as men.

People also enjoyed some games which we would not find acceptable today. Cock fighting was popular: two cockerels were placed in a ring to attack each other. The one which survived was the winner. At a fair you might find bear baiting, where people taunted a bear. In some parts of the country there was a yearly 'cat race'. A cat was placed in a barrel and hung high up. Men on horseback would hit the barrel with hammers until the cat fell out.

What festivals did people celebrate?

As well as festivals such as Easter, the Church had many saints days, which gave people the chance to celebrate. People also celebrated the bringing in of the harvest in the autumn, the summer festival of Beltane, and Hallowe'en. Just like today, weddings were very important family event and a great excuse for a party. There would be lots of eating, drinking, dancing and singing.

What other entertainment would there be in towns and villages?

Certain towns had the right to have fairs every year. People travelled far to visit these fairs. There were entertainers such as acrobats, jugglers, storytellers, fortune tellers, men with dancing bears as well as all kinds of stalls. You had to be careful of 'cut purses' - thieves who cut the strings of the money bag hanging from your waist!

Travelling groups of actors would perform plays at fairs or in villages. Many of the noble families employed a person called a bard who was an official storyteller. He told stories, often in verse, about exciting events from history. Travelling storytellers would visit villages, bringing news from other places. In the long dark winters, people would sit and tell traditional stories, dance and sing songs accompanied by instruments like the fiddle.

