

## Brief History of the Game of “Bowls” or “Bowling on the Green”

- Some form of the game has been played for 7,000 years.
- Bowls is a target sport played on a flat grass surface. It is similar in concept to the Italian game of Bocce or the French game Pétanque with the main distinguishing features being:
  - **playing surface** - Bocce can be played on any flat surface court - grass, sand, clay. Bowls are played on bent grass or artificial turf outside or carpet inside and the rink has a ditch on either end.
  - **biased bowl used** - Bocce balls are perfectly round and all the same size and weight. Bowls vary in size and weight, and are elliptical with one side weighted (biased).
  - **delivery method of the bowls** - Bocce are thrown directly at the target. Bowls are rolled and aimed off centre to allow the curve or bias to take effect.
- The game of Bowls was well established in England by 1299 AD – Southampton Old Bowling Green Club (established in 1299) at Southampton, Hampshire, England is the oldest established bowling club in the world which is still active.
- The game became so popular in England and France it was prohibited by law because archery (essential to the national defence) was being neglected. French King, Charles IV, prohibited the game in 1319, and King Edward III prohibited it in 1361. This was the start of the “unlawful games” genre lasting hundreds of years with Richard II in 1388, Edward IV in 1477 and Henry VII in 1496 all ruling against the game for the common man. Making it truly a “**Sport of Kings**”. In 1541 Henry VIII arrived at the “**Inferior Persons**” rule where other than on Christmas day the working classes were barred from bowling. Whereas “**every Nobleman and others having manors, land, tenements or yearly profits for life in his own or wives right to yearly value of £100 might play bowls without penalty**”. For this reason it became fashionable for the aristocracy (nobility and gentry) to have private bowling greens. The game of bowls were highly favored as a genteel pastime.
- Almost every English monarch was a bowler, and the royal estates were all equipped with bowling greens. A bowling green has been a permanent feature at Windsor Castle. Anne Boleyn was a bowler, as were many noblewomen, including the first Princess Elizabeth and Queen Victoria. **Edward VIII\*** was president of the Royal Household Bowling Club of Windsor Castle, and his brother George VI was an enthusiastic bowler and patron of the English Bowling Association. [\*NOTE – Douglas Chandor painted Edward VIII, then Prince of Wales, in 1921. This portrait is said to have launched Douglas’ career as it was the feature portrait in Douglas’ first solo exhibition.]
- The famous Drake Game – Certainly the most famous story in lawn bowls is about Sir Francis Drake and the Spanish Armada. On July 19, 1588, Drake was involved in a game at Plymouth, England when he was notified that the Spanish Armada had been sighted. The tale says his response was, “*There is plenty of time to win the game and thrash the Spaniards too.*” He then proceeded to finish his match and the British Navy then proceeded to soundly defeat the Armada.

- Unlike in France and England, the game of Bowls was never suppressed in Scotland. Scottish bowlers developed the present flat green game. They are also credited with carrying the game to all parts of the world. Robert Burns enjoyed the game as did Sir Walter Scott.
- “Bowls is no longer a rich man’s game, there are thousands of poor bowlers!”
- Lawn bowling was introduced into the American Colonies in the 1600’s (Boston – 1615 and New Amsterdam (now New York) in 1623)
- George Washington grew up with the game and became an avid bowler and loved the game. There was a bowling green at Mount Vernon.
- A bowling green became a status symbol in Colonial America. In many an American community the city fathers insisted on a bowling green as well as a bandstand in the main city park to indicate their cultural prestige. This popularity lasted until the Revolution and Declaration of Impendence in **1776**. At this time all things British were swept away including bowling greens. Bowling Greens where plowed up, converted to campgrounds, planted with flowers and hidden as much as possible.
- The game was not revived in the US until **1879** with a small private club in New Jersey and soon bowling greens were once again flourishing along the eastern seaboard. The first club on the West coast was in San Francisco in 1899 and then in Los Angelis in 1908.
- The most famous American lawn bowler of modern times was Walt Disney.
- Today there are 93 Lawn Bowling clubs (slit into 7 geographic divisions) in the US with a total of 2,700 members. FYI - There are no Lawn Bowling clubs in Texas, and the closes club is located at Village Green Bowls Club, Hot Springs Village, Arkansas.
- By contrast there are 271 clubs totaling 18,000 members in Canada.

#### Sources:

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- Bowls USA website: <https://www.bowlsusa.us/>
- Bowls Canada website: <https://bowlscanada.com/en/>