

Opportunities for Recreation in Pre-Industrial times

The working life of a peasant was long and hard, but there were many holidays:

Most holidays were determined by the church holy days. At Christmas there were twelve days of leisure and recreation until the twelfth night, a week at Easter and time off at Whitsun.

There were occasional breaks from work – wakes, fairs, mops, market days, weddings, funerals.

Depending on the type of holiday, certain entertainments and food were provided by the church or Lord of the Manor. Laws dictated that young men practised their archery but many ignored that and played ball games instead.

Gambling was a means of getting rich quick so lots of activities allowed the opportunity for gambling: cock fighting, bare-knuckle boxing, bear-baiting.

In the Middle Ages, leisure time was something for the whole community: everyone joined in: the pub was a gathering place for gambling, drinking, courtship, gossip and playing games.

Weekly markets allowed people to trade – a meeting place for town and country people: a chance to buy and sell goods – just like modern markets and boot sales ! The village square was transformed on market days: entertainments and leisure activities were laid on: bull baiting, bear baiting, games, contests, rides, cock fighting, smock races for women, jugglers, musicians, puppet shows !!

Local Wakes

- The churches of small rural towns and villages in Britain all have a foundation (veneration) day, to honour the Patron Saint of the church. These special days became local holidays ‘holydays’, whereby a visit to church was followed by a festival.
- These festivals included drinking and pastimes such as Tug-o-War, throwing the stone (or brick/boot/haggis/hammer), ditch or wall jumping, wrestling, climbing a pole, and sometimes combat related pastimes such as stave fighting and archery. Some wakes still exist and include sporting events such as ‘smock races’ (family athletic races) and the Maypole (an old courting ritual turned child entertainment).

Festivals

Religious: **Christmas** (12 days of festivities)

Easter (one week)+

Whitsun (2 or 3 days)

Seasonal: **May Day:** a festival representing springtime (traditionally, at May Day festivals there is a Maypole for dancing, a May-Day Queen, and Morris Dancing

Harvest Festival: (thanksgiving) - in September or October - to give thanks for the annual harvest / to celebrate the end of harvest

- Festivals bring the community together
- The lord of the manor might provide for his serfs

Fairs and Mops

- These originated from market days within rural, agricultural towns.
- Farming work usually took a back seat on market days, everyone went to town for the market and the fair.
- Goods and animals were traded, and 'funfairs' offered for entertainment.
- **Mop Fairs**, such as the Stratford on Avon Mop Fair, had its origins in hiring agricultural and domestic labour - it began some time during the reign of Edward III (14th century) still exists although nowadays it is a funfair)
- Grand Fairs have always been present in market towns on specific days during the year from Medieval times.
- An example is the **Nottingham Goose Fair** (where 20,000 geese were once sold), still in existence today, and the Tavistock (Devon) Goose Fair, dating back to the 12th Century.
- **Scarborough Fair** was a famous fair in the Middle Ages:
 - merchants visited from all over England, and abroad, taking goods to sell eg: wine, silk, jewellery, lace, glass, silver, gold, iron and furs, and taking back with them woollen cloth and leather, grain, foodstuffs and many craft goods.
 - Minstrels, jugglers, dancers, and fortune-tellers came to entertain the people.

Function of wakes and fairs

1. (thanksgiving) Some fairs were **seasonal** - in thanksgiving for harvest/end of harvest/seasonal celebration . Some festivals/fairs were **religious**, eg at Christmas/Easter/May Day/Whitsun
2. (hiring/trading) **Mop Fairs** were hiring fairs, for finding employment/income opportunity, such as the Stratford upon Avon Mop Fair and Nottingham Goose Fair (Trading)
3. (social) social/bringing community together
4. (Wakes) **Wakes** were festivals to celebrate the patron of the village church/Saints Day
5. (patronage) for lord of the manor to provide for his serfs
6. (courtship) courtship/meeting a mate

Type of activity

7. (cruel/violent activities) baiting sports/blood sports/ mob games/single sticks/backswording
8. (athletic activities) races/smock races/races for prizes/wrestling/sack races/ice skating
9. (simple activities/ folk sports) folk sports/whistling matches/jingling matches/gurning or grinning contests/catching greasy pigs/climbing greasy pole
10. (feasting/drinking) feasting/drinking/wagering
11. (courtship) courtship/sexual license/promiscuity (if mark not given above)