

Croquet

Alice found herself in a game of croquet played with live animals against the Queen of Hearts, a satire on this popular Victorian pursuit, for which 'Wimbledon' was founded in 1868.

Alice



Alice puzzled by the Queen's croquet game. Lewis Carroll (1864).

It was when playing croquet that Lewis Carroll first saw Alice Liddell and her sisters from the window of the Christ Church library. It was more than a decade later that the All-England Croquet Club was founded in Wimbledon in 1868 at the height of the Victorian croquet craze, adopting lawn tennis as a novelty addition in 1875. He even wrote four letters to the *St James Gazette* proposing rule changes that prefigure the modern system of 'seeding' in tennis championships.

It is an interesting coincidence that *St James Gazette* was derivative of the court newsletter for activities around the Palace of St James, where croquet was introduced in England in the form of the 'pell mell' game in the court grounds that became St James Park. And furthermore that the park featured a flock of pelicans, which were unusual birds that may have prompted Lewis Carroll to imagine croquet played with live birds as the mallets.

Croquet

Croquet is a ball and mallet lawn game popular in the 19th century, derived from the *paille maille* of French origin via Mary Queen of Scots and may go back to Eleanor of Aquitaine.

Eleanor



'A Game of Earth Billiards', from *Les Amours de Gombault et Macée* (16th century).

Croquet is a ball and mallet lawn game that reached a high popularity in the 19th century, derived from the earlier game called variously 'pall mall', 'pell mell' and '*paille maille*' (ball-and-mallet) and '*jeu de mail*', popular in mediaeval France and neighbouring countries. By the 16th century, *jeu de mail* was a well-established court game preferred by the French king Henri II, according to his younger contemporary Brantôme (~1600). James I imported croquet to England in the form of a *paille maille* set that he brought from Scotland when he became King of England in 1604, presumably inherited from his mother Mary Queen of Scots, who had herself been brought up in the French court of Henri II and Diane de Poitiers in the mid-16th century.

Etymologically, the name seems to derive from the Old French term '*pesle mesle*' ('haphazardly') that dates back to the 12th century in a troubadour poem of Chrétien de Troyes (1173), who wrote romances dedicated to

“ ‘Get to your places!’ shouted the Queen in a voice of thunder, and people began running about in all directions, tumbling up against each other; however, they got settled down in a minute or two, and the game began. Alice thought she had never seen such a curious croquet-ground in her life; it was all ridges and furrows; the balls were live hedgehogs, the mallets live flamingoes, and the soldiers had to double themselves up and to stand on their hands and feet, to make the arches.

The chief difficulty Alice found at first was in managing her flamingo: she succeeded in getting its body tucked away, comfortably enough, under her arm, with its legs hanging down, but generally, just as she had got its neck nicely straightened out, and was going to give the hedgehog a blow with its head, it would twist itself round and look up in her face, with such a puzzled expression that she could not help bursting out laughing; and when she had got its head down, and was going to begin again, it was very provoking to find that the hedgehog had unrolled itself, and was in the act of crawling away: besides all this, there was generally a ridge or furrow in the way wherever she wanted to send the hedgehog to, and, as the doubled-up soldiers were always getting up and walking off to other parts of the ground, Alice soon came to the conclusion that it was a very difficult game indeed.

The players all played at once without waiting for turns, quarrelling all the while, and fighting for the hedgehogs; and in a very short time the Queen was in a furious passion, and went stamping about, and shouting ‘Off with his head!’ or ‘Off with her head!’ about once in a minute.

...

‘How do you like the Queen?’ said the Cat in a low voice.

‘Not at all,’ said Alice: ‘she’s so extremely —’ Just then she noticed that the Queen was close behind her, listening: so she went on, ‘— likely to win, that it’s hardly worth while finishing the game.’ ”

Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, Chapter 8

Eleanor of Aquitaine and her daughter, Marie de Champagne. While the particular activity implied by the term from that era is unclear, it seems possible that it refers to a court game of a similar type to croquet, and that it was one of the games and pastimes popular among the ladies of the mediaeval courts of France.



Mediaeval ladies playing a ball game, from *Chansoniers de Montpellier* (1280-90).