

HISTORY'S ODDITIES

REAL OR RUBBISH?



By Sarah Smith

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Welcome to History's Oddities: Real or Rubbish?

History is full of tales so strange; they sound like stuff of fiction. But then again, the human past is also full of fiction so strange, it can almost pass for history. That's where this booklet comes in.

Over the next few pages, you will find pairs of bizarre stories: one that really happened, and one that I've made up to test your wits. Your challenge is simple: read both, trust your instincts, and decide which is fact and which is fabrication.

The answers are tucked safely at the back, but no peeking (and no googling – put that phone away!) until you've made your guesses. After all, half the fun is seeing just how well you can separate *real history* from *rubbish*.

Round 1: Napoleon's Pests

Story A: Run Rabbit Run



Picture this: it's 1807. Napoleon Bonaparte has just signed the Treaty of Tilsit with Russia. To celebrate, he organises a rabbit hunt for himself and his officers.

They line up, guns ready, expecting a glorious day of sport. But when the cages are opened, hundred of rabbits don't run away... instead they run *toward* Napoleon. Yes, that's right, they charge at him, swarming his hunting party like a furry tidal wave.

As it turns out, the rabbits were not wild – they were farm raised, bred for eating. So, when they saw men in uniforms, they thought 'Ah, dinner time!'

The outcome... the mighty emperor of France was chased off the field by bunnies!

Story B: Seagull Express

Napoleon, master strategist, supposedly tried to train seagulls to deliver military messages across the English Channel.

The plan? Teach the birds to carry sealed notes to French troops stationed along the coast. Now seagulls are pretty smart and the plan *almost* worked... but the problem was, the gulls kept flying back to the fish markets at Boulogne, lured by the smell of herring.



The project was abandoned, and the British navy never had to worry about an aerial pigeon army... because it was seagulls.

Round 2: Animals in History

Story A: The Lobster that Survived Being Boiled... Twice



In the 18th century, a fisherman in Cornwall caught a lobster that went on to escape the boiling pot twice. Folk at the local market were astonished when the lobster was returned to the tank, seemingly unharmed, only for it to escape a second boiling attempt.

News of the ‘indestructible lobster’ spread through the town, and it became something of a local celebrity – people came to see it, marvelling at how an animal could survive what would normally be certain death.

While it eventually met its fate, the story became legend among fishermen, celebrated in letters and tavern tales.

Story B: The Knighted Donkey

Legend has it that during a minor skirmish in Gascony in 1367, a remarkably brave donkey carried vital supplies straight through enemy lines, never faltering despite arrows whizzing nearby.

The tale goes that the local lord was so impressed by the animal’s courage that he knighted it on the spot, dubbing it “Sir Donkey of Gascony.” Some accounts even claim that a tiny coat of arms was sewn onto its saddle, marking its new status.

Villagers reportedly marveled at the sight—a humble donkey elevated to the rank of knight, parading proudly through the camp. It was a whimsical story of loyalty, bravery, and a touch of medieval humor, reminding all that sometimes heroism comes in the most unexpected forms.



Round 3: Ridiculous Fashion

Story A: The Spoon-Fed Ruff

Let's go back a couple of centuries... Now we know that Elizabethan courtiers loved their giant lace collars – the famous ruffs. Some were so wide they stretched nearly a foot from the neck. But supposedly, they had quite a severe problem: people couldn't reach their mouths properly at dinner.



According to one account, courtiers were given foot-long spoons, designed to reach past the lace to deliver the food, and in extreme cases, people had to wear little wooden shoulder-stilts under their ruffs to keep the collars balanced while they ate. A fashion statement and workout all in one!

Story B: Crinoline Fires

Jumping forward now to the mid-19th century, fashion demanded that women wear enormous hoop skirts called crinolines. They looked glamorous – skirts so wide you had to go through doors sideways... but they had a deadly flaw: they were basically giant cages of flammable fabric.

A brush too close to an open flame – a candle, a fireplace, even a stray spark from a pipe – and the whole skirt could go up in seconds. Newspapers reported hundreds of deaths across Europe and America caused by crinoline fires.



One story from 1863 tells of a young woman in Boston, whose skirt caught fire at a party, and within minutes, several others were in flames too, because the skirts brushed together. Doctors and fire brigades began warning women, but despite the danger, crinolines stayed popular for years.

Round 4: Strange Jobs

Story A: The Knocker-Upper

Before alarm clocks became affordable, British towns had a very unusual profession: the 'knocker-upper.'



These were people who walked the streets in the early hours, carrying long poles – sometimes bamboo, sometimes just a fishing rod – and their job was to tap on bedroom windows to wake workers in time for their shifts.

It wasn't just factory workers either, people like mill workers, dock labourers, even bakers relied on them. Some knocker-uppers were so precise they knew which windows belonged to which families, and they'd stand outside waiting for the tiniest movement to prove the person was awake.

They worked well into the 1920s, and in some towns, even later. Imagine having to pay someone to wake you up in the morning!

Story B: The Candle Watcher

In wealthy households before gas lighting, candles weren't just for light – they were a status symbol. Supposedly, there was even a job called the 'candle-watcher.' Their duty? To stand in the dining room or ballroom and keep an eye on the wax.

If a candle started dripping unevenly, the candle-watcher would trim the wick, adjust the flame, or even swap the candle entirely to make sure the display looked perfect.

According to one account, the role was taken so seriously, that an uneven candle was seen as a terrible embarrassment to the host. One house in Bath allegedly had three candle-watchers stationed during a dinner party to make sure the wax fell gracefully.



Round 5: Odd Wars

Story A: The Canadian Moose Skirmish

According to local lore from Ontario, there was a time when moose herds turned audaciously bold, venturing into turnip fields and leaving a trail of trampled fences and devoured crops in their wake.



Farmers, desperate to protect their livelihoods, are said to have formed makeshift militias, armed with rifles, pitchforks, and whatever farm tools they could grab. Yet the moose, unfazed, allegedly stood their ground, marching through the fields as if daring anyone to stop them.

In the end, the farmers supposedly had no choice but to retreat, leaving the moose victorious—and the turnips gone.

Story B: The Rabbit Army of Anglesey

In the 19th century, farmers on the island of Anglesey in Wales faced a relentless enemy: rabbits. The creatures were reproducing at an astonishing rate, destroying crops and devastating fields.

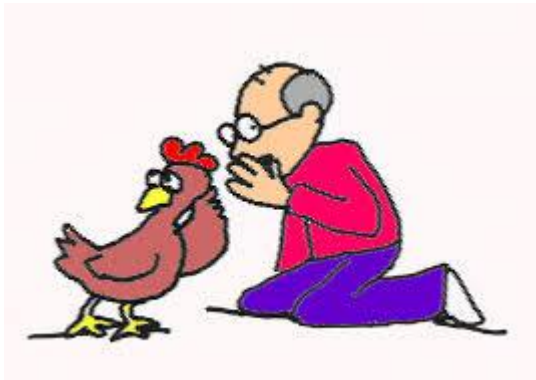
Farmers tried everything – traps, fences, and dogs – but the rabbits kept coming. Eventually some farmers recruited some local militia-style volunteers to systematically cull the population. Newspaper reports at the time described the rabbits as an ‘army’ overwhelming the land, and the effort was compared to a small-scale military campaign.



The rabbit plague caused serious economic damage and led to new strategies for pest control, but the rabbits kept bouncing back, making it one of the most frustrating ‘wars’ between humans and wildlife in history.

Round 6: Quirky Medicine

Story A: The Chicken Whisperer



Some historical accounts suggest that Romans had some rather unusual cures for hiccups. One method involved whispering lines of poetry directly into the ears of chickens.

Farmers and townspeople believed that reciting verses from poets like Virgil or Ovid could somehow transfer the hiccups to the bird and bring relief to the patient.

Some accounts even suggest that certain verses were considered more “potent” than others, with epic lines or mournful elegies said to work best.

It certainly must have been a curious sight in a Roman household.

Story B: Skull Moss for Nosebleeds

In early modern Europe, medicine could be... well, a little grim. For nosebleeds, some people turned to powdered moss scraped from human skulls. Apothecaries would grind it into a fine powder, bottle it, and sell it as a cure-all.

The idea wasn’t just superstition – people genuinely believed that death itself gave the moss special healing powers. The more skulls it came from, the more potent the remedy was considered. Some believe that moss from the skull of a criminal was especially strong!

It sounds macabre today, but back then it was considered a legitimate treatment. And believe it or not, you could buy this ‘skull moss’ in pharmacies across Europe.



Round 7: Feasts and Food Follies

Story A: Seaweed Mead



Across northern Europe, there's a tale of Viking feasts featuring a very peculiar drink: 'seaweed mead.' This honey wine was supposedly boiled with strands of kelp to give it a briny, ocean-like flavour.

According to legend, it was so pungent that only the bravest warriors dared to drink it. Imagine a longhouse filled with Vikings, grinning through the taste of the ocean while raising their horn to the gods. Certainly, a drink that would test both courage and stomach. Clearly Vikings not only had stamina, but a very strong gag reflex.

Story B: Stuffed Dormice

At Roman banquets, one of the most prize delicacies was the humble dormouse – but not just any dormouse. These little rodents were placed in special clay jars called *gliraria*, and fed with nuts, chestnuts and honey until they were plump.

Once ready they were stuffed with more nuts and spices (presumably the mouse had expired by this point) and roasted before being served as an appetizer to the Roman elite. Wealthy citizens considered them a mark of sophistication – a dish to show off your refinement, your taste, and your ability to afford such extravagance.



Some sources suggest that they were served at funerals or special feasts, making them a symbol of status as well as a snack. Imagine sitting down at a Roman table, delicately nibbling a honey roasted dormouse while your guests compare their wine selection.

Round 8: Royal Oddities

Story A (True): King James I vs. Tobacco

“King James I of England wasn’t a fan of tobacco. In 1604, he published a pamphlet called *A Counterblaste to Tobacco*, in which he described smoking as ‘a custome lothsome to the eye, hateful to the nose, harmful to the brain, and dangerous to the lungs.’

He was arguably the first monarch to officially condemn smoking, warning of its moral, physical, and social dangers. Imagine the court’s reaction — courtiers



tiptoeing around the king, nervously stubbing out their pipes while he delivered his fiery critique.

Some historians suggest his hatred of tobacco also reflected concern over imports from the colonies, since he disliked foreign influence creeping into English habits. Either way, James made it very clear: puffing wasn’t fit for the nobility.”

Story B: King Charles II Bans Forks

The next story takes us a little later, to the court of King Charles II. According to legend, the king had a particular distaste for forks, considering them an unmanly affectation imported from the Continent.

At his table, courtiers were expected to eat with knife, spoon, and their hands—but never a fork. One can almost picture the scene: a grand dining hall filled with nobles in fine silks and lace, carefully trying to twirl strands of pasta—or whatever English equivalent of long noodles existed at the time—between their fingers, while the king looked on with a mixture of amusement and stern disapproval.

Some accounts suggest that even the most practiced diners would fumble, sending morsels tumbling onto embroidered tablecloths, all in the shadow of Charles II’s peculiar etiquette. It was a curious blend of royal authority, social expectation, and everyday clumsiness—a reminder that even kings could shape manners in the most unexpected ways.



Round 9: Strange Sports

Story A: Tug-of-War with Boats

Now, traveling across the Mediterranean, there's a tale from Ancient Egypt about a rather unusual sport: tug-of-war with boats. Allegedly, two slender papyrus boats would be lashed together on the Nile, and teams of rowers would pull furiously in opposite directions until one vessel capsized.

The participants ranged from nobles seeking amusement to labourers eager to test their strength, all gripping ropes and leaning back with every ounce of effort. You can almost picture the scene: water splashing over the sides, shouts and laughter echoing across the riverbanks, and the tense anticipation of who would remain upright—and who would end up wet, muddy, and thoroughly humiliated.

It was a game of skill, strength, and perhaps a touch of bravado, and it must have been a spectacle that brought the river to life with excitement and mirth.

Story A (True): Mob Football

"In medieval England, there was a sport known as 'mob football.' And when we say 'sport,' we mean chaos. Entire villages could participate, with no set number of players, no defined field, and barely any rules.

The object? Get a ball — usually made of an inflated pig's bladder — to a designated goal, sometimes set miles apart. Matches could last for hours, and the action often spilled through streets, rivers, and fields.

People would be battered, drenched, and bruised — injuries were common. Sometimes the game was so disruptive that local authorities tried to ban it, but it remained popular because it brought communities together and offered a glorious, if dangerous, spectacle.



Round 10: Medieval Justice

Story A: The Mouse on Trial

In 16th-century France, there's a curious story of a mouse put on trial for nibbling grain in a local bakery. According to court records, the tiny defendant was treated much like any human offender: witnesses were summoned to testify, and a lawyer was even appointed to defend it.



The proceedings reportedly drew quite a crowd, with townspeople gathering to see the unusual case unfold. In the end, the mouse was sentenced to exile, released into the countryside far from the town to prevent further thefts.

One can almost picture the scene: the judge presiding solemnly, the lawyer making impassioned arguments on behalf of a whiskered client, and the townspeople murmuring in fascination at a trial unlike any other. It was a spectacle of justice, curiosity, and a touch of absurdity—meticulously recorded in the local archives for posterity.

Story B: Fining Roosters

Our next tale takes us to 16th-century Germany, where, according to local lore, roosters could be fined for crowing too early and disturbing the villagers' sleep.

The penalty, it is said, fell on the bird's owner, who was expected to pay in beer to their neighbors as compensation for the disruption. Imagine the scene: townspeople keeping careful tally of these "beer fines," mugs in hand, while the culprit rooster strutted proudly, seemingly oblivious to the rules it had broken.

Some accounts even suggest that certain particularly noisy roosters became notorious in the village, earning nicknames and inspiring good-natured grumbling from early risers. It was a quaint, humorous custom—a blend of community order, local justice, and the enduring charm of a spirited bird asserting its dawn-time authority.



The Big Reveal!

Round One: Napoleon's Pests

Story A: Run Rabbit Run – REAL

This actually happened in 1807. Contemporary accounts describe Napoleon laughing at first, then panicking when the animals just kept coming. His coach had to whisk him away while the rabbits clambered into the officers' boots, begging for food.

Story B: Seagull Express – RUBBISH

There is absolutely zero evidence to suggest that Napoleon did something as wacky as train seagulls to carry messages. If it were true, imagine modern France with the world's first gull air force!

Round 2: Animals in History

Story A: The Lobster That Survived Being Boiled... Twice – REAL

The lobster story is TRUE. That plucky crustacean really did escape the boiling pot twice. Lobsters were considered a luxury food in some areas, but were also sometimes fed to prisoners or servants – so a lobster escaping twice would have been a big deal.

Story B: The Knighted Donkey – RUBBISH

Totally made up – though I'd pay to see a tiny suit of armour on a donkey any day.

Round 3: Ridiculous Fashion

Story A: The Spoon-Fed Ruff – RUBBISH

The idea that people ate with foot long spoons is a total myth... though honestly, I wouldn't put it past Elizabethan fashion to be that impractical.

STORY B: Crinoline Fires – REAL

Crinolines really were deadly – reports suggest thousands of women died in crinoline fires during the 1800s. Some women even carried little fire blankets in their handbags, just in case... no, not really, I made that last bit up. The fire part was true though!

Round 4: Strange Jobs

Story A: The Knocker-Upper – REAL

Knocker-uppers were totally real and they were still around in some towns until alarm clocks became cheap. Knocker-uppers were usually working class themselves, often older women or retired men supplementing their income. Sounds a bit extreme, but then it's essentially an old-fashioned version of a phone alarm, or a hotel wake-up call.

Story B: The Candle-Watcher – RUBBISH

The candle watcher job is a lie, though no doubt some poor servant had to fuss over a candle now and then.

Round 5: Odd Wars

Story A: The Canadian Moose Skirmish – RUBBISH

While it's a fun story, there's no record of this actually happening – it survives only in tall tales told by frontier families.

Story B: The Rabbit Army of Anglesey – REAL

Farmers in Anglesey really did battle a rabbit plague, and it was treated almost like a military campaign. Rabbits were a huge agricultural pest in the UK, leading to many formal culling campaigns, not just this one.

Round 6: Quirky Medicine

Story A: The Chicken Whisperer – RUBBISH

I totally made this up, though I would love to see someone try it today.

Story B: Skull Moss for Nosebleeds - REAL

Believe it or not, this was true. Early modern Europe was full of these... unusual cures as it relied heavily on superstition, trial-and-error, and bizarre ingredients. People also used powdered mummies, crushed insects, and animal parts for cures.

Round 7: Feasts and Food Follies

Story A: Seaweed Mead – RUBBISH

Complete legend, not a real Viking beverage, though I wouldn't rule out some experimental longhouse brews.

Story B: Stuffed Dormice – REAL

The Romans genuinely enjoyed stuffed dormice as a luxurious snack. Sounds revolting, but Roman dining culture was elaborate, with multiple courses, exotic ingredients, and a focus on impressing guests.

Round 8: Royal Oddities

Story A: King James I vs. Tobacco – REAL

The king really did condemn tobacco, and he really did publish that pamphlet. Smoking was becoming increasingly popular in England, especially among the wealthy and the court. James' pamphlet was part moral, part health warning, and part political statement.

Story B: King Charles II Bans Forks – RUBBISH

Royal decrees were sometimes practical, sometimes ridiculous, sometimes both, but this fork story is a complete fabrication... it's just fun to imagine it happening at a royal banquet.

Round 9: Strange Sports

Story A: Tug-of-War with Boats – RUBBISH

Totally made up – but it would have been hilarious to watch!

Story B: Mob Football – REAL

As much as mob football sounds like someone invented rugby, forgot the rules, and added pigs, it was actually a real sport. It was often part of local festivals and religious celebrations and could be rowdy, dangerous, and incredibly social.

Round 10: Medieval Justice

Story A: The Mouse on Trial – REAL

Believe it or not this is a true story – mice, pigs, and other animals really would have brought to court in medieval Europe. Crimes ranged from damaging property to harming humans. Some trials would be timed with religious festivals for maximum public spectacle.

Story B: Fining Roosters – RUBBISH

Yeah. This never happened... although in Switzerland a rooster was once executed for laying an egg, because people thought it was the devils work (honestly this one is actually *true*).

So, how did you do? Were you a master of historical deduction, or did some of the tall tales catch you out? Don't worry if you guessed wrong — even seasoned historians have been fooled by stranger stories than these.

The truth is, history has always had a flair for the ridiculous. That's what makes it such a joy to explore: one moment you're uncovering a forgotten law about pigs on trial, the next you're laughing at a tale so silly it *could* have been true.

Thanks for playing along! Keep your curiosity sharp, your sense of humour sharper, and remember: when it comes to the past, reality is often stranger than fiction.