

Nautical Archaeology - Part Two

Geert and Sarah

with some interesting facts from shipwrecks

IN the June 2015 issue of *Through The Green* we discussed the excavation of a small cargo ship that sank in the Zuiderzee around 1540. In the wreck several colf club heads were discovered. These finds threw an interesting new light on the equipment used some five hundred years ago in the golf-like game of colf.

In Part Two we would like to describe the excavation of two other cargo ships wrecked on the shores of the Shetland Islands in the mid-17th century when they were on their way to the Dutch East Indies. In the remains of the two ships several colf club heads were recovered which were ordered by colf players who worked in the commercial settlement of Batavia (Jakarta).

The Shetland colf ships

Great Britain and the Netherlands (at that time the Republic of the Seven Provinces or the United Netherlands) have not always been good friends. In the 17th and 18th centuries, in many battles during the four naval wars, they both tried to 'rule the waves of the seven seas'. Both nations wanted to secure the sea routes to discover new lands to set up trade settlements, to transport profitable goods to Europe and for the British to build new colonies. Acting like buccaneers they attacked each other's merchant ships. Therefore these ships were often equipped with cannons or accompanied by warships to keep the enemy away from the valuable cargo (Fig 1).

For the Netherlandish ships another way to avoid attacks from English naval ships and from buccaneers in the narrow Channel between France and Britain was to take a northerly route via Scotland, the Shetlands and Ireland to Kaap de Goede Hoop (Cape of Good Hope, South Africa) and continue eastward to the many settlements in Asia. This alternative course was dangerous as well. There were no reliable sea maps and the weather could be extremely rough. An unknown number of ships were shipwrecked on the rocks near the Shetland Islands. In the 1970s, two of these wrecked ships were located by maritime archaeologists and as far as possible excavated.

The Lastdrager (literally 'load carrier')

The *Lastdrager*, belonging to the Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie (V.O.C. [Dutch East India Company]), the first limited company in the world, was a 640-ton flute ship (Fig 2)



Fig 1 Many battles were fought between the English (later the British) and the Netherlandish fleets during the four naval wars in the 17th and 18th centuries, involving hundreds of warships. Thousands of seamen lost their lives in the fights for the supremacy on the world seas. – 'The Dutch burn down the English fleet before Chatham', Peter van den Velde (1634-after 1723) – Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

approximately 44 metres long with a maximum width of approximately 8.5 metres.

The *Lastdrager* made two successful return voyages from the harbour of Texel to Batavia, the commercial centre of all trade settlements in Asia in the then 'Dutch Indies', now the capital Djakarta of Indonesia. The ship, with miscellaneous cargo, sailed on the 4th of February 1653 for the 3rd time to the East Indies. It chose the north of Scotland route to avoid the military activities of the 1st Anglo-Dutch war (1652-1654) in the English Channel between France and England.

Unfortunately the ship was wrecked on the 2nd of March 1653 on the reefs of the northeast coast of the Isle of Yell (Bluemull Sound), one of the Shetlands (Fig 3). Of the fifty members of the crew only twenty-six men survived.

In 1971 Robert Sténuit and his team of the 'Groupe de Recherche Archéologique Sous-Marine Post-Médiévale' located, studied and excavated the scattered wreckage of the *Lastdrager*. Almost 3,000 artefacts were found. Amidst these artefacts four of them could not be identified and in the excavation reports these pieces of brass were described as 'fragments

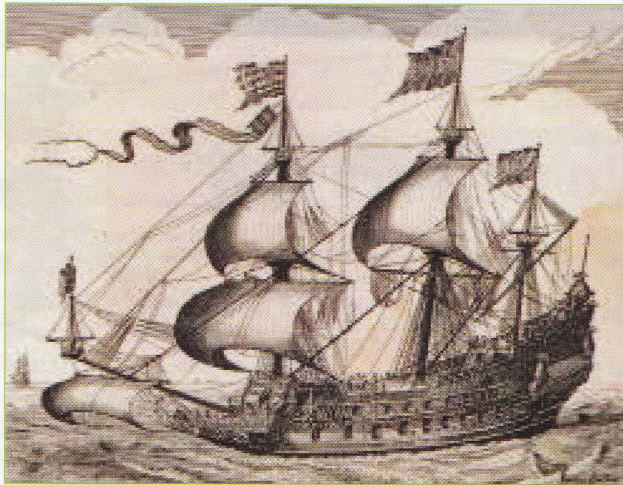


Fig 2 In present-day terms, these ships were small and very vulnerable; they brought all kinds of provisions, personnel belongings and merchandise to the various settlements in Asia. On their way back they took loads of quite profitable spices to Europe. – ‘Seascape with a Dutch flute-ship’, c.1640, published by Claes Jansz. Visscher – © Trustees of the British Museum

of cast brass supports, possibly the feet of a cauldron.’ Therefore these fragments were put away in a cardboard box labelled ‘cauldron feet’ and stowed away in a depot where they were almost forgotten. It was only in 1987 that the archaeologists found out by accident that the cauldron feet were some of the ‘oldest golf club heads’ ever found.

According to a paper by M Christopher Dobbs about the excavation of the cargo ship ‘Kennemerland’ (see hereafter) Robert



Fig 3 The sea routes between the many small islands of the Shetlands were not very well-known but the possibility of being confronted with the British enemy or buccaneers along the coast of the continent was considered by the Netherlandish merchants as more dangerous than trying to pass the treacherous coasts of the Shetlands. – <http://www.shetlandhamefarin.com>

Sténuit, the archaeologist, learnt that the artefacts found in this wreck were ‘golf club heads’. He recognised that the artefacts found in the Lastdrager were similar and therefore must have been club heads as well (Fig 4). The identification prompted their detailed study as relics of the ‘early days of a game that today is practised worldwide’ Being outsiders in the history of golf, Sténuit and his team were unaware of the difference between Scottish golf and Netherlandish colf.

The brass metal as used for the heads was exceptional. Until now in land-excavations only lead and lead alloy colf club heads (slofs) were found. The dimensions are not much different from the leaden heads. The length of three of the brass slofs was 99 millimetres; the fourth one measured only 91 millimetres. The weight of this small slof, 145 grams (including the wooden insert), could mean that it was the head of a children’s colf club. The weight of the other heads was respectively 226 grams (including the wooden stump), 205 grams (also including the stump) and 189 grams (excluding the wooden remains). All pieces are cast brass hollow shells with an opening at the rear end in which the ash shaft was inserted. The thickness of the brass shell varies between 2.9 and 3.5 millimetres. The shafts with the stumps still inserted in the hollow shell were made of robinia pseudoacacia (false acacia or black locust). These trees were indigenous to North America and were imported into the Netherlands as well as into Britain at the beginning of the 17th century.



Fig 4 One of the Lastdrager’s brass slofs seen from different angles; the strike face, the top and the back of the head. The club head is covered with green patina over orangish surfaces, triangular in cross section with an upward sloping end. The hard brass metal of the slofs could stand the constant movement of the sea very well. They are almost undamaged. – www.icollector.com

It is said that the wood of the false acacia is as strong as hazel and ash: the wood can be easily manipulated (bending) by means of hot steam. The stump (bent end) of the shaft was inserted in the opening at the rear end of the hollow club head and secured with a natural pine resin. In the stump some rough grooves were cut to obtain a better adhesion between glue, wood and metal. The shafts were completely rotted away in the course of the centuries. The use of false acacia for the shafts is fairly exceptional. Most of the club heads with remnants of the shaft found on land by accident or by excavations are made of hazel or ash.

There are no decorative lines, heel marks or cleek marks

heraldscotland

The Herald | sundayherald

'Golf debate rekindled as club heads are auctioned' by David Steele

[...] A rare discovery by divers on the wreck of a seventeenth century Dutch merchant ship will form the centrepiece of an auction of golf memorabilia to be held in Glasgow today.

The two golf club heads were recovered recently by Belgian divers from the wreck of the *Lastdrager*, which sank off Shetland in 1653, and were passed to Sotheby's for auction.

They will fuel the rival historical claims of the invention of the game of golf in its present form, and their existence off the coast of Scotland adds weight to theories of likely cross-national influence and fertilisation between lands on either side of the North Sea.

Mr Christopher Proudlove of Sotheby's said: "We are delighted to be offering these club heads for sale, as such items have never before been offered at auction. There are only some 23 in existence, most in British or Dutch museums, and others in private collections.

"It is difficult to put a price on them as they have never been offered in this form before. We will just have to wait and see."

[...]

From www.heraldscotland.com, 17 July 1989

The New York Times

'Auctions' by Terry Trucco

[...] Sotheby's recent sale featured two 17th-century golf-club heads recovered from the wreck of a Dutch East India Company ship that sank off the Shetland Islands in 1653. The earliest heads ever offered at auction, they each brought a mere \$15,840. The problem was that the Dutch played their early version of golf on ice. 'People looked at them out of curiosity, but they didn't bid,' said Ms. Kurke. [...]

From www.nytimes.com, 25 August 1989

visible on the heads. With the exception of the smaller (children?) colf sloop, the other club heads were almost exactly the same. Because colf was played with only one club, this could mean that it wasn't several players who ordered a colf club, but that one or two players ordered some spare clubs in case the original club got broken.

It could well be that there were wooden colf balls or perhaps hair-filled leather colf balls on board as well, but they would have completely decayed in the course of the centuries. The colf clubs were probably meant for one or more colvers in Batavia who ordered them from club makers in the Netherlands. Because the brass clubs with robinia pseudoacacia shafts must have been rather expensive, it could well be that the clubs were ordered by Governor General Carel Reyniersz. However if the *Lastdrager* had not been wrecked and had arrived in Batavia, the Governor General had died in the meantime. If his successor Joan Maetsuycker was an addicted colf player too, is not known.

Part of the above information is derived from the article 'Some mid-17th-century golf club heads found during underwater excavations and their significance for the study of the early history of the game of golf' by Robert Sténuit, published in *'The International Journal of Nautical Archaeology'*, 1991.

The Kennemerland (named after a region)

Some ten years later in December 1662, another cargo carrier from the V.O.C., the *Kennemerland*, stranded during a heavy storm on the rocks near the Stoura Stack of the Out Skerries, northeast of the Shetland Isles (Fig 5). From the hundred and fifty people on board only three survived the shipwreck.

The *Kennemerland* was an armed merchant vessel, a relatively common class of ship in the 17th century. The ship of 940 tons was 45 metres long and had a maximum width of 11 metres. The cargo included a consignment of gold, mercury, clay pipes, tobacco boxes and 'golf clubs'. The vessel left the harbour of Texel on the 14th December for its second voyage to Batavia (Djakarta) and to avoid trouble with the British military vessels and the Channel buccaneers, it took the northerly route.

The remains of the *Kennemerland* were located in 1971 by members of the Aston University Sub Aqua Club. During an extensive sub-marine archaeological expedition in 1978, five leaden artefacts were discovered and excavated, but it is possible that more club heads were on board the ship. The lead alloy artefacts remained unidentified for several years although a photograph of the artefacts was published in the hope that identification would be forthcoming.

It was only in 1984 that the five objects were identified by Ian Tait of the Shetland Museum as 'golf clubs'. He noted the similarity of the club heads recovered from a 17th century archaeological site in Amsterdam. His identification was later confirmed by David Stirk, a British expert on golf history.

Noteworthy is that three of the five club heads were made for left-handed players.

All five lead alloy club heads were between 102 and 106 millimetres long and between 42 and 45 millimetres high.

Although the shafts have not survived, it shows that the clubs were constructed by casting the lead alloy exterior around the hooked end of the wooden shaft.

The club head has a triangular form. The 'strike face' is flat and is set at approximately 9° to the perpendicular. The sole is flat and the back of the head is somewhat rounded. The back of the heads are provided with some decorative striated lines 3.5 millimetres wide near the end of the heads where the wooden shaft is inserted. A further pair of striated lines runs almost parallel at a distance of 17 millimetres. Between the two pairs of lines there are three crosses with ten 'plus' signs in the interstices. It is not clear whether these crosses are just decorations or that they reflect the three saltires (Andreas crosses) of the coat of arms of the city of Amsterdam.

Outside the second pair of lines there are three stamps of a crowned rose which could be the hall mark of the metal used for the head or the cleek mark of the club maker or the club head maker (Fig 6). Three of the club heads are fairly eroded but show faintly the same kind of striated lines; the same imprints are visible. The fifth club head is too damaged to recognise any possible signs and lines.

The other lead-tin alloy heads are severely damaged by the age-long movements of the sea; the double striated lines are hardly visible.

The colf clubs were probably for colf players in Batavia who ordered them from club and ball makers in the Netherlands, just like so many Scottish golf players in the British settlements and colonies did more than a hundred years later with the golf club and ball makers in Scotland.

Slofs made of lead alloy make lower prices on auctions than the rare brass slofs. The value depends on the finding place, the state of preservation and possible marks of the club maker, the



Fig 5 The Kennemerland stranded during a heavy storm on the rocks near the Stoura Stack of the Out Skerries. From the hundred-fifty crew members only three men survived. The routes between these small rocky islands were not well-known. A heavy storm could easily swipe a ship off course. Many other not yet discovered ships maybe sunk near the Shetland Islands.
– www.rightmove.co.uk

guild of club makers or other decorations. Lead club heads are very common and therefore the asking price is much lower than that of the rare brass heads.

The slofs are now held at the Shetland Museum in the town of Lerwick, the capital of the Shetland Islands.

Part of the above information was derived from the article 'The Kennemerland site. An Interim Report. The sixth and seventh seasons, 1984 & 1987, and the identification of five golf clubs' by C T C Dobbs and R A Price, published in 'The International Journal of Nautical Archaeology', 1991.

Some observations

In the interim report, the authors Dobbs and Price were of the opinion that the discovery of the 'golf clubs' in the Kennemerland together with the find of similar 'golf clubs' in the Lastdrager 'constitute the earliest visible evidence for the spread of golf from Northern Europe'. And Robert Sténuit described the 'golf club heads' as 'relics of the early days of a game that is practiced world-wide today'.

Throughout the reports there is a constant mix-up between the games of colf and golf. It is understandable that specialists in underwater archaeology are unaware of the distinction between the games of golf and colf, nor of the history of these games. It is however remarkable that an expert in this matter, the late David Stirk, did not correct the views of the reporters. The slofs, which is their correct name, have no relation with Scottish golf whatsoever.

In general, we experience in other contexts that the Flemish/Netherlandish colf game is called more regularly 'golf' but not the other way around. In the report on the Kennemerland excavations, it is explained that three of the five club heads were meant for

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Fig 6 Picture of the somewhat-rounded back of the least damaged club head. The slof weighs 300 gram and, is 103 millimetres long and 42 millimetres high. The thickness of the shell wall is 3.4 millimetres. The club head is decorated with double-striated lines, three Andreas crosses and three crowned roses. Also the letter D and perhaps I are visible. The meaning of these letters is unknown. –

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