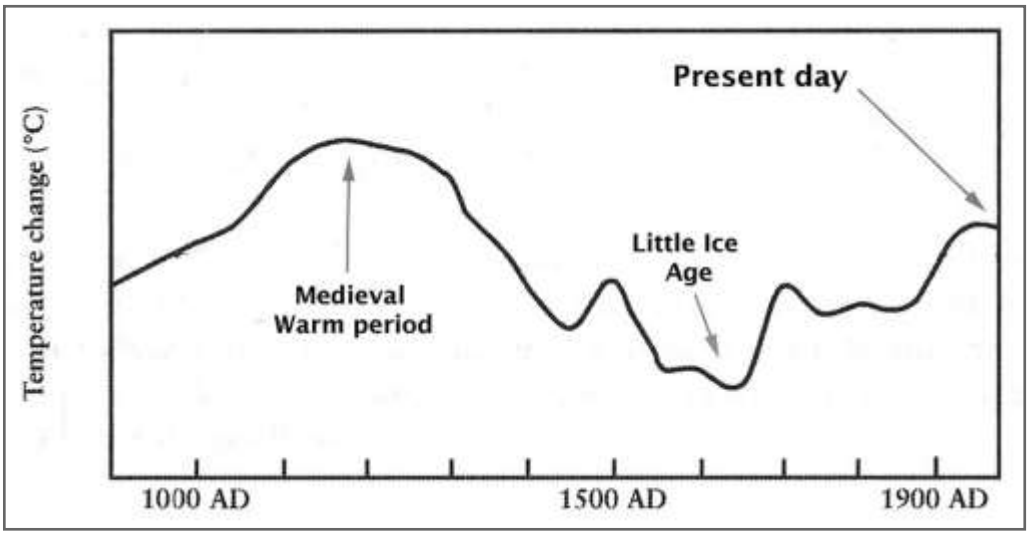
The Little Ice Age in Scotland

Between 1500 and 1800 temperatures in the northern hemisphere were noticeable lower than previously or since. The most sever phase, the so-called 'Little Ice Age', was between 1550 and 1700, though meteorologists disagree about the exact dates of these periods.

Scotland and the other West European countries suffered from these lower temperatures for some 200 years.

In Scotland, the temperatures dropped approximately 2.0° Celsius.

During the Middle Ages temperatures rose far above what we call today 'average'. This period was followed c.1500 by a colder period with lower temperatures than average: the Little Ice Age. –
From 'Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Report 1990'



It is remarkable that no skaters are visible on the paintings although skating was not an unknown feature. – 'Frost Fair on the River Thames near the Temple', 1683-84, by Thomas Wyke – www.sfondidesktop.eu

During the extremely cold period of the Little Ice Age even the Thames in London was frozen regularly for longer periods of time though this did have its positive consequences as well. Paintings show that when the river Thames was frozen many Londoners took to the frozen river to enjoy themselves on its slippery surface. Enterprising people organised 'Great Frost Fairs' which attracted thousands of people.

In Flanders and the Northern Netherlands many people took to the frozen waters to enjoy themselves with skating, ice dancing, sledging, playing colf and playing a kind of curling or just walking on the slippery ice surface. From the 16th century onwards painters in Flanders and later in the Northern Netherlands have recorded these cheerful scenes in their famous paintings.
(See the chapter 'The Little Ice Age in the Low Countries' in this book)

Page 139 bottom: In the background of the painting of Pieter Bruegel the Elder a frozen lake or pond is shown. The ice surface is made snow-free. All sorts of people are depicted, enjoying themselves on the ice. One can clearly recognise several colf players and some people who are playing a Flemish 'bol game', a game that looks like the Scottish game of curling. – Detail of the painting 'Hunters in the snow' – Google Art Project: KHM, Wien

One of the oldest pictures in which during the Little Ice Age people are enjoying themselves on the ice dates from 1565 when the Flemish painter Pieter Bruegel the Elder created his 'Hunters in the snow'. – Google Art Project: KHM, Wien

But what about Scotland during the Little Ice Age?

Scotland suffered even more from the severe climatic conditions than England, the Northern Netherlands or Flanders. Although a drop of 2.0° Celsius does not look that much, the consequences were rather severe. Scientists found strong evidence that there was a small glacier in Coire and Lochain in the Cairngorms. They speculate that glaciers may have re-formed around the time of the Little Ice Age, and several mountain peaks were covered with snow all year round.
('The Holocene', © 2015 SAGE Publications)

The lower temperatures shortened the agricultural growing season by almost two months, with the consequence that the staple crops were devastated. It brought shortage of food which caused severe famine, in particular to the people in the Highlands and on the islands. Large parts of the region were depopulated because of starvation and emigration to the plantations in Ireland. On the Low Lands the Little Ice Age was not as severe as on the west coast, but it is recorded that the Firth of Forth, the Firth of Tay and several lochs were frozen regularly for long periods of time.

The Scots loved to go to the frozen lochs and firths to enjoy themselves with skating, (careful) walking and playing games.
The 'Edinburgh Skating Club' was the world's first skating club, founded around 1743. One could conclude that skating (figure skating, not speed skating) was well-known and practised whenever there was sufficient ice on the waters in the Lowlands.

Scientists discovered sufficient evidence that during the Little Ice Age small glaciers reformed in the Cairngorms. – www.bgs.ac.uk

When the firths and the lochs were frozen many Scots loved to go out on the ice to enjoy themselves with skating, curling, walking and taking some refreshments. – Charles Lees, 'Skaters, a scene on Duddingston Loch near Edinburgh', 1853 – www.sothebys.com

Curling, the other 'Scotland's game'

It is interesting to look at another Scottish game, curling, and its relation to the Little Ice Age. It is not surprising that this ice game developed, evolved or perhaps was imported from Flanders in the 16th century at the beginning of the Little Ice Age. One of the oldest pictures of curling players can be seen on the famous painting 'Hunters in the snow' from the Flemish painter Pieter Bruegel the Elder (see page 139).
In the background of this painting a group of people are playing a game which looks very familiar to the game of curling. In Flanders the game was called 'kayuten' or kallityten' (Cornelis Kiliaan, 'Etymoligicon Teutonicæ Linguæ, 1599).

The game of colf played on the ice was probably an adaptation of the game played on land and probably the 'curling'-like game was also an adaptation of a game played on the forecourts of the Flemish taverns.

Top: Curling on the ice became very popular in Scotland during the Little Ice Age. It developed during the following centuries into a world-wide and even Olympic sport. – 'The curlers' by Sir George Harvey, 1835 – www.nationalgalleries.org

Bottom: During the Little Ice Age the Netherlanders also loved to play on the ice as can be seen in this drawing. It is one of the few drawings in which both colf and curling are depicted. – 'The Four Seasons / Hyems' from Robert de Baudous after Cornelis Claesz van Wieringen, c.1615 – © Trustees of the British Museum

The oldest Scottish painting showing curling players (see page 143) dates back to c.1700. The painting is called 'Curling' and is displayed in Traquair House near Innerleithen in the Scottish Borders. The unknown painter is considered as being Netherlandish, but the décor of the painting and the attire of the players indicate clearly that the presentation is Scottish.

A unique painting of a Scottish winter scene, called 'Curling'. The unknown painter is probably Netherlandish.

Detail of the 'Curling' painting; it is the first-known painting exclusively dedicated to the game of curling. The background of the painting and the attire of the players is not Netherlandish but Scottish. – Anonymous, c.1700 – Traquair Charitable Trust

The first curling clubs were founded from the first half of the 18th century onwards. The first clubs were the Kilsyth club and the Kirkintilloch club both founded in 1716. By 1750 there were already eleven of such clubs while by 1800 there were at least forty-two curling clubs. The 'mother' of all curling clubs is the 'Royal Caledonian Curling Club' founded in 1838 in Edinburgh.
Curling spread its wings in the 19th century when Scottish emigrants founded the 'Royal Montreal Curling Club' in 1807 and the 'Orchard Lake Curling Club' in Michigan (USA) in 1830.

Today there are more than a million curling players spread over 35 countries. The majority of curlers are Canadians.

But what about golf during the Little Ice Age

There are quite some parallels to draw between the two games. Both curling and golf are seen as 'Scotland's Games', and both curlers and golfers are from the same social class. The games were played in winter, mainly in the Scottish Lowlands in the region round Edinburgh: Leith for the golfers and Duddingston Loch for the curlers. It could well be that Scottish curlers were originally 'stone throwing' on land and moved during the Little Ice Age onto the ice as did the Netherlandish colvers.
Why is it that golfers did not go to the frozen Duddingston Loch or the Firths of Tay and Forth, wearing skates or ice spurs, to continue to play their game in an adapted (short game) form, when playing golf on the hard-frozen and snow-covered links, parks, river forelands and other wasteland was hardly possible?

Page 145 bottom: In the coldest of winters the Londoners went to the frozen Thames to enjoy skating on the slippery surface. Even the game of hockey was played on the ice. We have not seen any golf players on the Forth, Tay or on the many lochs in the golf region of Scotland. – Regent's Canal Tunnel, 'The Thames frozen over at Richmond' – The Illustrated London News, 3 March 1855

Top: Curling on the ice became very popular in Scotland during the Little Ice Age. As with golfers, curlers were middle-class people. Is it possible that golfers changed their clubs for curling stones during the cold winters? – 'Curling at Duddingston Loch' by Robert Anderson, 1880 – http://londonscots.net

Golf was a winter game and very popular, but what were the many golf addicts doing during these extreme cold winters? Just waiting until the following year? We have not been able to find any references to golfers on the ice, no reports on the influence of the Little Ice Age on the daily (sport) life especially in the regions of Fifes and the Lothian, nor did we find any paintings or drawings of 'ice golfers'. Could it be that in the 17th century during the Little Ice Age these golfers turned to curling during spells that golf on the links and in the fields were not possible? Did they indeed swap their clubs for curling stones?

As far as we have found out no research has been done about the game of golf during the Little Ace Age. Interesting research subject?