

# *Still a lot to explain*

---

The games of colf, crosse and mail were until some decades hardly known to people who are linked in one way or another to the history of golf. In the course of hundreds of years these games have never been researched and no publication ever has been brought out. Golf historians always mentioned the games, though only in the margin, probably for completeness sake.

Albeit that in the last decade several books and papers have been published about colf, crosse and mail, this information does not reach the people who communicate about these games or who neglect this new information that has been published. As a consequence new facts are lost and wrong interpretations continue to exist.

Books about the history of golf and its continental kindred games seldom reach second editions in which superseded or incorrect views could be corrected. Many books about golf always include a small chapter about the history of the game. With one or two exceptions this information is mainly derived from what the author found in other books and on the internet.

Especially on the internet where websites, including 'Wikipedia', have extensive readership and where everybody is free to copy or invent information quite some incorrect facts continue to exist. A clear example is the explanation of the game of colf used once on the internet:

*"Kolf is a sport in which a ball is stuck with a kolf stick (a cross between a golf club and a hockey stick). The object is to hit the poles on the kolf pitch."*

(WebMuseum, Paris)

Several other authors felt prompted to copy this explanation in their websites. Alas, the explanation is wrong but what has been written once remains written, right or wrong.

One cannot expect that curators of museums are knowledgeable about the games pictured in their paintings. It is unclear where they get the (often incorrect) information from.

The same goes for the auction houses who offer what they think are clubs and balls of the games. Often they seem to except the information given by their clients who sometimes themselves do not have a clear view of some of their collectables.

Therefore we have made just a small selection of the very many superseded views, mis-interpretations and doubtful or sometimes ill-founded statements. As one can see there is still a lot to be explained about the centuries old games of colf, crosse and mail. Perhaps this paper will help to add some knowledge to the historians who want to include some information about these games in their publications about the history of golf.

## Museums



The National Library of Scotland shows on its website 'Golf in Scotland' "*a 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch tile, depicting two golfers*". That the Scottish Library mixes up the games of golf and colf is remarkable. The players on the tiles are certainly not golf players but colf players because the tiles are Netherlandish and so are the Flemish and Netherlandish players depicted on the tiles and not Scotsmen, playing golf in the Netherlands.

From <http://digital.nls.uk/golf-in-scotland/background.html>

The 'WebMuseum, Paris' discussed the winter landscape painting 'Enjoying the ice' (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam) from the Netherlandish painter Hendrick Avercamp. The kolf players depicted are mentioned as playing 'a kind of ice hockey' whilst the kolf clubs are explained as a 'cross between a golf club and a hockey stick'.

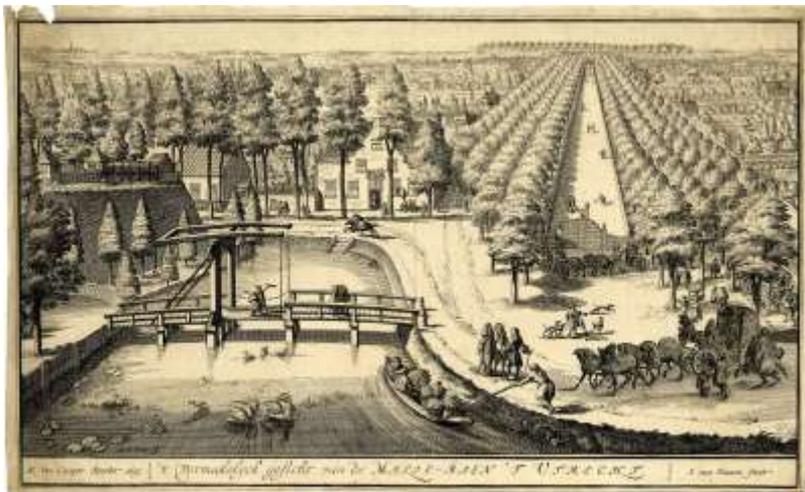
The game depicted is a stick and ball game not unlike Scottish golf and is certainly not a kind of ice-hockey. Both golf clubs and hockey sticks were at that time made of wood only. Kolf clubs were made of wooden shafts with a metal club head since the 15<sup>th</sup> century. This game of kolf was played from the 13<sup>th</sup> century in Flanders and The Netherlands until the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. During the severe part of the Little Ice Age (approximately between 1550-1700) the game was played on the frozen canals, lakes and rivers too. The kolf game has no resemblance or any historic relationship with an ice hockey game.

On the Iris Getty magazine website a new acquisition of the museum is discussed. A drawing is shown of a winter landscape from the Netherlandish artist Esaias van de Velde (1614). The kolf game shown on the drawing is called 'a kind of ice croquet'.

The players depicted are certainly not playing a kind of ice croquet. The game, not unlike Scottish golf, was played already in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The kolf game has neither resemblance nor any historic relationship with the game of croquet.

*Large Square Tower to the left of a Frozen River, 1614, Esaias van de Velde (1587-1630) – © Christie's Images Limited (2014) – <http://blogs.getty.edu>*





*Pictures page 4:*

*Top: Hendrick Avercamp, 'A scene on the ice', c.1625 –  
National Gallery of Art, Washington, USA*

*Middle: Hendrik Avercamp, c.1620 –*

*The Royal Collection © 2011, her majesty Queen Elizabeth II*

*Bottom: Colour etching by Jan van Vianen, 1697 –*

*© Trustees of the British Museum*

On the website of the National Gallery of Art USA the painting 'A Scene on the Ice' from Hendrick Avercamp is discussed. In the right-hand corner two little boys play a game of kolf, 'a cross between modern-day hockey and golf'.

When only two players are depicted of which one is leaning on his club or stick one can hardly imagine that these boys are playing a hockey-like game. Furthermore Scottish golf was never played on ice. The two boys are playing the Flemish-Netherlandish game of colf.

At a presentation of the drawing, 'A game of kolf on the ice' by Hendrick Avercamp the presenter on the The Royal Collection Trust website explained that the game of kolf as depicted in the drawing started as an indoor game with wooden and leather balls and metal-headed clubs. During the life of Avercamp the game was taken outside.

In reality the game of colf started in the 13<sup>th</sup> century as an outdoor game both on land and on ice. At the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the game developed into an indoor game with the name 'kolf'.

An engraving in the British Museum shows the 'maliebaan' (mail alley) in Utrecht, The Netherlands. The curators of the museum explain that on the maliebaan people are playing 'croquet'.

On the engraving of the maliebaan in Utrecht the players are of course playing the game of malie (Netherlandish) or paille maille/mail (French) or pall mall (English) and not croquet. If there is any resemblance with the game of croquet, it is only the outer look of the club.

The United States Golf Association (USGA) Museum stated that the name golf derived linguistically from the Netherlandish word 'kolf' or 'kolve', meaning club. In the Scottish dialect of the late 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries the Netherlandish word became 'gouff' or 'coff' to become 'golf' in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

There are no documents supporting such a development of the name of the game that we call today golf.

## Auctioneers



The Bonham's Auctioneers offered for sale "*a rare 19<sup>th</sup> century hole club, used in a ball and stick game, not dissimilar to golf that was played in the Flemish part of Belgium*" (lot 182 from 25<sup>th</sup> July 2009's auction, guide price £400-£600; not sold).

The game of 'chole' or better say the game of crosse was never played in Flanders. Crosse (choule) was and still is played in the border zone between the north of France and the south of Belgium, the ancient province of Hainaut. In Flanders the game of colf was played.

This club is a so-called 'crosse à brochon or 'crocheton'. With this club the curved end of the shaft is inserted straight into the club head.



At 4<sup>th</sup> April 2011, the Mullock's Auctioneers offered "*two early Dutch chloe golf clubs, one fitted with hexonal shaft and rubberised grip*" (lot 464, guide price £120-£150; no hammer price available).

Golf was before 1893 never played in the Netherlands. The two clubs are not Dutch and not used for a c(k)olf game. The name 'chloe' in relation to golf or kolf in the Netherlands does not exist. For further details see the above Bonham's club.

The Mullock's Auctioneers included in their catalogue of 10 November 2013, "*An interesting chloe wooden oval ball c. 1880 featuring line ridges*" (lot 115, guide price £300-£500; not sold). It is certainly not a chloe (?) wooden oval ball but rather a 'choulette'. Such ovoid wooden balls were and are still used in the Franco-Belgian game of crosse (or cho[u]le). The top of the ovoid end the ridges show that the ball was made on a 'turning lathe' and not hand-made as was mainly done in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Such balls can still be found on flea markets in the crosse region.



The same auctioneer offered in 2013 (10 November) for sale "*3x various rare Dutch Kolf boxwood balls (c.1845) to include one plain smooth ball with various strike marks, another smooth ball with abundant inlaid nails and another with circular lines and an abundance of screws stamped 'no 3' to each pole. Each ball measures 4.25 (10.8 cm).*" The guide price was £1,500-£2,000 (lot 165, not sold).

The experts in the game of (indoor) kolf do not recognise these balls as being kolf balls. Only the size is approximately the same. It is our opinion that these balls were used in the 'Lyonnais' variant of the French 'jeu de boule' game and have no relationship with kolf whatsoever.





The Christie's Auctioneers offered on 30<sup>th</sup> May 2012 "a fine Belgian chole club, 19<sup>th</sup> century, together with a group of seven Belgian painted chole balls with an original net carrying four other balls" (guide price £1,000-£1,500; hammer price £875).

The club is indeed a crosse but its age is according to the players in the region very doubtful.

The balls used in the game of crosse ('crocheton' or 'crosse à brochon') had and have an ovoid shape. The seven balls offered are spherical. The other balls as mentioned 'by the way' are the real choulettes.



The Green Jacket Auctioneers offered in July 2014 "a rare 1790-1820 Dutch chloe club (precursor to golf). Offered here is a rare circa 1790-1820 Dutch chole club, which is frequently cited as one of the primary influences for the game we now know as "golf". This antique club was produced in the 1800s, and most likely in the early 1800s. This club measures 37," and is in very good condition. A truly great "History of Golf" example."

Starting bid for this lot, number 80, \$100; last bid \$203.55, hammer price will be known in October 2014.

The club on offer is not a 'Dutch club'. The peculiar name 'chloe' is unknown in the history of the continental golf-like games. The club on offer is a rather modern Franco-Belgian 'crosse à manchon' (socket club) produced probably after the Great War. In the 1800s clubs were made differently; see, for instance, the Bonham's offer or Mullock's lot 464. This modern club head is equipped with a socket, forged into the club head in which a straight shaft is inserted. The crosse à manchon is still made and used in the Franco-Belgian border region.

A collector informed us that he bought at a fair a utensil at a price of £10. A representative of Bonham's Auctioneers said it was a "chole club".



All we can say about this piece of equipment is that it certainly is not a crosse (choule) club.

## Books

In the publication ‘A Swing Through Time’ (2007) Olive Geddes stated that jeu de mail (pall-mall) “*in one form resembled croquet*”.

As the long paille-maille court was played on an exceptionally straight and hard court with a stake, an ‘archet’ or an elevated ring as the final target at a far distance, there is not a lot of resemblance with the relatively much younger game of croquet. There is indeed some resemblance in the outer look of the club used but the way in which these clubs were used was completely different.

In the publication ‘GOLF Scotland’s Game’, David Hamilton stated in an explication of colf in the Netherlands on the ice that “*the clubs in use on ice are invariably long-nosed woods, not metal clubs*”.

Although the colf club heads on the ‘ice scene’ paintings and drawings are very small, when scrutinizing some hundred of these pictures it is not too difficult to conclude that with one or two exceptions all pictures show colf clubs with metal heads. It could be that the author was misled by a poem from Six of Chandelier called ‘s Amsterdammers Winter’ in which the poet uses the name ‘Schotse Klik’ (Scottish Cleek) for the club he is going to use on the ice.

*Top: From ‘Nouvelles règles pour le jeu de mail’, 1717, Lauthier*

*Bottom: Romeyn de Hooghe, ‘Figures à la mode’, 1682-1702 –*

© Trustees of the British Museum



In the book ‘Golf’ from the Badminton Library (1890) the game of kolf is mentioned. Andrew Lang wrote the section about the history of golf. He used the expression “*clearly golf is no more kolf than cricket is poker*”. This paraging expression was based on an account from the Reverend Mr Walker, a minister of Canongate, from 1795. The minister described the short (indoor) game of kolf he witnessed during his stay in the Netherlands. As a scholarly historian Mr Lang must have been aware of the difference between the colf game played since at least the 13<sup>th</sup> century in the towns, in the fields and on the ice and the short kolf game played on the fore court of the taverns and indoors from the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards. There are still writers of today who copy Lang’s rather childish and incorrect expression to prove that colf has no relation whatsoever with the game of golf.



*Illustration by Henri Brown in the book ‘de Nederlanden’, 1841*

To overcome the problem of mixing up the different games and their origins, it would be helpful to come to a uniform description of these games, for example:

- ◆ colf, the Flemish-Netherlandish golf-like game
- ◆ kolf, the Netherlandish indoor and court game
- ◆ crosse or choules, the Franco-Belgian golf-like game
- ◆ mail or pall mall, the originally Italian-French golf-like game.

The problem we are confronted with is that when contacting people or institutes involved no reactions are given.