

## Clubs for colf



The oldest written reference to the game of colf dates from 1261. The Flemish poet Jacob van Maerlant wrote in his poem 'Merlijn's Boec' on line 4625: 'Mit ener coluen' (with a colf club), referring to young boys playing with a club on a field outside a town. The picture shows a page from the Steinfurter manuscript from 1326, kept at Bentheim, Germany. – [Webmuseum Colf & Kolf](http://Webmuseum.Colf&Kolf)

## Pictorial evidence

After the unknown 'facts' of the pre-history of colf, mainly the handwritten and hand-painted medieval religious books provide us with some information about the game of colf, the players and their equipment.

Many of these manuscripts, ordered by royalty and aristocracy of Europe, were made by monks and artisans, especially in the county of Flanders (Bruges, Ghent) and the north of France. The folios (pages) of these books of hours, breviaries, calendars, etc. were decorated with religious presentations. At the borders around these religious texts and presentations and on the bottom of the page pictures from daily life were sometimes shown, and stick and ball games were sometimes part of these different, daily-life pictures. The oldest border and bottom page pictures in manuscript illuminations in which colf players are shown date from c.1500.

### *1<sup>st</sup> Generation*

The first presentations of colf players found on illuminations from the 15<sup>th</sup> century show that these colvers were using wooden clubs. These clubs were made from a branch of a tree that had the suitable curb at the end of one side. These curved branches were shaped into a more or less handsome club by woodworkers, carpenters, bow makers, anglers or by the players themselves. Also trunks of relative young (ash) trees, the roots included, were dug up and split lengthwise in such a way that each part had a bent root of the tree. This more specific work was probably done by ‘artisans’ who shaped the partial trunk/root into a colf club.

### *2<sup>nd</sup> Generation*

When nearly all ash trees were cut, artisans introduced a straight piece of wood or a branch of a tree: the straight stick in colf club design. The stick was fashioned in such a way that the top end was somewhat thicker, the middle part somewhat thinner, and the low end again somewhat thicker and flattened. This low end was held in a hot steam of boiling water, and step by step this part of the stick was bent into the required angle. Finally the club head was slightly heated, not burned, in a fire to harden the wood. These 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation of colf clubs remained in use for quite a long time, although in the meantime new clubs had entered the colf market.

### *3<sup>rd</sup> Generation*

Ash wood, the preferred wood for ancient clubs, was supple and did not break easily, but the wood was rather soft and could not withstand the constant impact of the ball, notwithstanding the hardening by fire. So the artisans introduced a new type of colf clubs: the ‘composite clubs’.

A composite club had two separate parts, being an (ash) wood shaft and a hardwood club head. The stick was manipulated into a shape similar to the shafts of the second generation without the root bend or the forced bend. A separate hardwood club head was carved not very different from the previous curved end of the colf clubs. Finally these two parts had to be fixed together, but we have found no information about the way in which they did this.

The use of the hardwood club head increased the durability of the club significantly. Furthermore, with some more weight to the bottom end of the club, its balance improved.



*Top: In this illumination from the book of hours of Duke Philip the Handsome from c.1500, colvers are using simple wooden clubs curved on one side to hit or push a wooden ball towards a hole in the ground. – Real Collegio de Corpus Christi, Valencia*

*Right: The player in this illumination carries a colf club over his shoulder. It is clearly visible that the wooden club head is a separate part of the club. It is one of the oldest presentations of a composite colf club. – Detail from the illumination in the ‘Golf Book of Hours’ produced by the Flemish artisan Simon Bening, c.1540 – © The British Library Board*



### *4<sup>th</sup> Generation*

The change of balance in the newly introduced composite clubs was not satisfactory for the colvers. It could well be that the players, who probably went more and more into the fields outside the towns, wanted to hit balls over larger distances and probably needed clubs with a heavier club head. Again club makers developed new club heads in which a piece of metal (lead) was attached or included. With this lead insert the club head became much heavier and allowed players to hit the ball further than before. It is not clear how the club makers joined the two parts together and how they secured the lead/tin alloy onto or into the hardwood head.

Bent wooden clubs continued to be used until far in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, probably by the humble people who could not afford the ‘sophisticated’ metal-headed clubs.



*Detail of a colf match in Flanders. Illumination from Simon Bening (c.1540) in the manuscript called the ‘Golf Book of Hours’. The player who is approaching the hole is putting the ball into the hole. He carries a club with a whole or partly iron club head. It is the first presentation of iron-headed clubs in the game of colf. –*

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### *Written evidence*

In 1429, the council of the city of Zierikzee issued an ordinance prescribing that *‘nobody strikes the ball on the streets with clubs with lead or iron heads’*. This ordinance showed for the first time that besides different kinds of wooden clubs, around the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, iron-headed colf clubs were used. It is not clear whether the clubs referred to in this ordinance had wooden heads with lead/tin inserts, the so-called fourth generation clubs, or that in Zierikzee and perhaps several other places, a new generation of ‘all-in’ iron-headed colf clubs was being referred to.

*(‘Early Golf’, Steven J.H. van Hengel, 1990)*

*In the ordinance of the council of the city of Zierikzee from 1429 for the first time in the history of the game of colf, clubs with an iron head are mentioned. As can be seen on this map, outside the city walls much more space was available for playing a long game with lead-headed colf clubs. – Jacob van Deventer, 1545 – [www.oudelandkaarten.eu](http://www.oudelandkaarten.eu)*



It is remarkable that in the intramural game iron-headed colf clubs were used. Increasing the club head weight suggests, within limits, that one can hit the ball further but was there sufficient

space in town to go for ‘distance’? It is not surprising that the town council banned these ‘colf hooligans’ from the town into the open fields.

In the course of time – we cannot be more precise – the curved wooden club and subsequently the lead insert colf club disappeared step by step (or rather hit by hit) from the scene and the iron club head took over. This take-over was probably in line with the increasing ordinances issued by the councils, forbidding playing colf inside the town at all. Consequently the players moved into the open fields outside the town where the space available urged colvers to hit the colf ball much further, which is the reason why they needed a club with a much better weight balance: the iron-headed clubface was the ideal solution.

## *Archaeological evidence*

### *5<sup>th</sup> Generation*

The earliest find of iron club heads, dated from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, were found in a filled-in moat near the ancient manor of Great Bentveld, close to the city of Haarlem. The heads found measured between 9.0 centimetres and 9.4 centimetres in length, and the weights were respectively 535 grams and 605 grams. The weights led us believe that the heads were of solid lead. The shaft was putrefied completely in the course of the centuries. The total weight of the club could be estimated at approximately 800 grams.



*These 'colf slofs' (colf club heads), found in a filled-in canal from the manor house 'Great Bentveld' in the city of Haarlem area, are the oldest-ever club heads of stick and ball games found in Europe (14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century). It was the final step in the change from all wooden colf clubs into iron-headed colf clubs, and perhaps the change from a short intramural colf game into a long colf game too. – Webmuseum Colf & Kolf*

*The opening in the rear of the lead/tin alloy club head was made considerably larger in order to enter a larger root stump in the opening. As a result the total weight of the club head would become about 25% lighter.*



The shaft was probably made of a split trunk including its root part. This root stump was carved in such a way that it fitted into a small opening at the back of the leaden club head. The iron pin from the club head was carefully hammered or screwed into the stump for final fixing. The excavated club heads do not show any additional fixing devices.

### *6<sup>th</sup> Generation*

It was probably the excessive weight of the colf club that urged players to look for less heavy club heads. The solution was the use of a lead-tin alloy, a much lighter metal than the all leaden club heads. In the heel of the head a bigger hole was left open for inserting the larger root stump of the wooden shaft, and the final securing of the shaft in the club head was done with a peg. The combination of the lead-tin alloy and the bigger hole in the back of the head reduced the weight to probably 600 – 700 grams. Handling the club during play must have been somewhat easier.

## 7<sup>th</sup> Generation

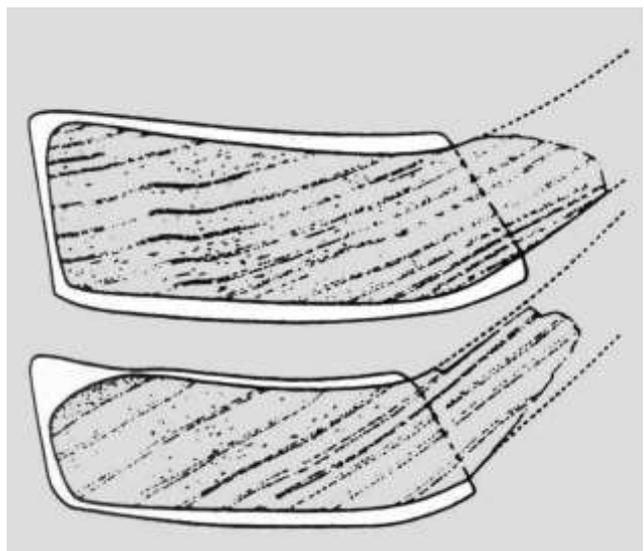
By the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century club makers developed a new system for manufacturing colf club heads with a significant reduction in weight. Because the shaft could not be made lighter, thinner or shorter, something had to be done again with the club head. The idea was to deepen the opening at the rear of the head to almost the entire length, and to have this hole totally filled with the end of the shaft.

To enlarge the interior open space of the club head was problematic from a manufacturing point of view, and the solution to the problem was to make a thin (0.2 centimetre) sheath of lead/tin alloy, approximately 10 x 10 centimetres. The enlarged flat bend of the shaft was placed on the sheath which would then be folded around the shaft end in such a way that the curved end of the shaft filled the whole interior of the head. When the folded sheet cooled off it shrunk around the shaft end and no further fixing was needed. There are no marks on the heads for additional fixing pins.

Excavations show that sometimes after hundreds of years the remnants of the wooden shaft stumps are still inextricably inserted in the hollow metal cover. The weight of the modern 'slof' (colf club head) averaged 250 grams; the total weight of a colf club was approximately 500 grams, not that different from crosse clubs and golf clubs.

*The seventh generation of colf club heads had a flat, very thin sheath of lead/tin alloy folded around the bent end of the shaft. In this way the end of the shaft filled the whole interior of the head. When the sheath had cooled off it shrunk tightly around the shaft end, and no further fixing with pins or glue was needed. –*

*Webmuseum Colf & Kolf*



Finds of colf club heads during excavations show that these heads were also made of bronze and copper. We do not know the advantage of the use of these materials. They were more expensive to make, especially the copper ones. Only the 'rich and beautiful' could (or wanted to) afford the extra money for such clubs, and that is one of the reasons that such finds are much more valuable today. If for sale at all, copper slofs could make thousands of euros, bronze slofs could make hundreds of euros, while lead-tin alloy heads vary in price, depending on the condition of the slofs, but up to 100 euros. Sometimes metal detector hobbyists do not recognise a piece of iron as a colf slof and throw it away. Others think they have found the 'golden pot' and ask ridiculous prices on E-Bay or the Netherlandish equivalent 'Marktplaats'.

The introduction of metal club heads was the start of specialised club makers. It is not clear yet whether these club makers were blacksmiths for the heads or woodworkers for the shafts or perhaps assemblers of the different parts of the colf clubs. The club makers produced 'made to measure' colf clubs as well: for left- and right-handers, small and big colvers, women, children, etc. This new kind of sheath-folded colf clubs did not change anymore. By the end of the 'lifetime' of colf (c.1700) this type of club was still in use.



*An undamaged colf club head from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The meaning of the cleek marks is not known. The marks as well as the design of the slof could be of help to find out who the club maker was. Unfortunately such research has not yet been undertaken.–  
Webmuseum Colf & Kolf*

The sequence of the seven generations of clubs follows the development of new club design. So far it has not been possible to put the various generations into a timetable, for a newly developed club did not immediately replace the previous one and the clubs coexisted, sometimes for centuries. The dates of the pictures from and documents about colf clubs do not represent the moment of introduction of these clubs; they just show the existence of such clubs.

The size of the club heads varied depending on the club maker or the blacksmith or on the requirements of the buyer. The length of the slofs seldom exceeded 10 centimetres. The sole and the height of the slof were approximately 3.0 centimetres while the inclination was between 0 and 20°. Children had their own colf clubs which varied from wooden toy-like clubs to simplified wooden clubs or to 7<sup>th</sup> generation 'mini' metal clubs. These metal heads were light (less than 100 grams) and had a length of 6 – 7 centimetres. The inclination of the face is often straight up, perhaps to overcome the risk that the balls will fly through windows or hit people.

In the course of the years many iron colf club heads have been found. These finds made it possible to draw a reasonable clear picture of the development of the Netherlandish colf clubs.

In some ice scene and genre paintings from the 17<sup>th</sup> century colf clubs are depicted which have some resemblance with Scottish long nose clubs. Such a club was described by the Netherlandish poet Six van Chandelier in 1650 as a 'Schotse klik' (Scottish cleek). It is not clear where this club and its name came from. In the Scottish golf vocabulary at that time such a name did not exist. The name cleek or klik could be just an onomatopoeia. (For details about the clubs and Six van Chandelier's poem, see chapter 'Cleeks, kliks and tally sticks' in this book.)

No documents have been found supporting the idea that such 'cleek look-alikes' were imported from Scotland or that they were produced by Netherlandish club makers. When playing on the ice it was not possible to make a full swing, hence the game on ice was more an approach game or a target game. To play such a game one does not need a cleek, since an iron club could do the job as well as the kliek.



*One of just a few presentations of colf players using wooden klieks on frozen lakes, ponds and canals. A poem from Joannes Six van Chandelier ('s Amsterdammers Winter'), in which the words 'schotse klik' (Scottish cleek) and 'pennebal' (feathery ball) were used, made many people believe that on the ice, colf players replaced their traditional leaden colf club with a wooden kliek, although looking at the many paintings of colvers on the ice it is rare that they use the wooden kliek. – Detail of 'Winter Games on the frozen river Ijssel', c.1626, Hendrick Avercamp – National Gallery of Art, Washington, Woodner Collection, Gift of Andrea Woodner*

The striking face of the iron colf slof was flat without any corrugation lines or small dots. In combination with the smooth wooden balls without any dimples, lines or any other irregularities, we can imagine that colvers could not hit balls far and sure.

Many colf slofs found during the years are imprinted with dotted and drawn line decorations. On several club heads different marks are imprinted. We suppose that such marks are a kind of signature of the club maker or of the town where the clubs were made. Up to now no attempts have been made to find out more about the meaning of these marks.

*We have not found any documents about the origin and the meaning of the marks on the colf slofs. As the marks on Scottish golf club head show who the club maker was, we suppose that also the marks on colf club heads were a kind of signature of the club maker or the town where the clubs were made. –*

*Photo's by Pieter de Breuk*



## *The shaft*

Most shafts of colf clubs were made of ash wood (*fraxinus excelsior*). Ash wood is fairly sturdy, whippy and it will not break easily. After the simple 'branch' shafts the club makers used a young ash tree with a diameter of approximately 25 – 30 centimetres. The tree was unearthed and split vertically in several parts depending on the appropriate root parts. The split-up trunk was cut off, including the root, at a length of 1.50 metres, and the split trunk was then carved into a rough shape. The shaft was made round, square or in an octagonal form, somewhat wider at the top, smaller in the middle part and wider again at the root part. Now the root part had to be modified into a stump that would exactly fit in the opening of the heel of the club. The root stump was manipulated into an angle of approximately 120° towards the shaft.

The triangular form of the club head opening prevented the connecting stump coming apart from the head after the impact of the ball on the shaft. The shaft was probably fixed into the club head with glue. There are no visible signs on the heads which could show that additional fixation by means of wooden or iron pegs was applied. The final length of the shaft was approximately 1.10 metres.

Most shafts were applied with grips of leather strips, cord or cloth, and the length varied from 25 up to 35 centimetres. The grips were often equipped with a decorative brush of small leather or cord.



*Club makers produced in their workshops the wooden shafts for the colf clubs. They assembled these shafts and had the club heads made by blacksmiths, added the grip to the shaft and then sold the complete club to their customers. They produced 'made to measure' clubs as well: left- and right-hand clubs, children's clubs, copper and brass clubs, long and short clubs, etc. – From 'Verzameling van Nederlandsche tafereelen van kunsten, ambachten en bedrijven voor kinderen', P.N. Muylt*

*A beautiful gable stone from 1610 at the front of a house in the centre of the ancient town of Hoorn, province of North-Holland. Four hundred years ago a club maker produced colf clubs here for the many colvers who played on the sandy paths around the town, and on the frozen lakes, ponds and canals during the cold winters of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. – Webmuseum Colf & Kolf*





*When after the end of the Little Ice Age, colvers returned from their short colf game on the frozen surfaces of the canals, ponds and lakes to the new short 'court' game near the taverns, they took their leaden clubs and wooden balls with them. After a while specific clubs and balls were introduced which was much more suitable for this different club and ball game. – 'Kolfbaan de Olifant, J.H. Verheijen, 1810-1830 – Het Utrechts Archief, Utrecht, The Netherlands*

It is obvious that the great popularity of the colf game must have eventually resulted in a shortage of ash trees. It is not known whether club makers started to grow ash trees themselves or that they started to use other comparable young trees such as eglantine and hazelnut.

The colf club makers probably did not make the whole club but assembled the slofs and the grips to the shafts which they made themselves.

When around 1700, the interest in the game of long golf diminished and eventually ceased, the game of short colf (kolf) on a small flat surface in the towns near the pubs took over. Players started to use their 'old' colf clubs with the 'old' colf balls on the new playing field.



*In the course of the years colvers started to use different kinds of colf clubs and balls that were more appropriate for such a short game on a hard court. The colf club on the left was used on the ice; the colf club on the right used on the hard court.*

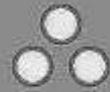
In the many presentations of short colf no wooden ‘long nose’ clubs, like klieks, are used. The requirements of the court game and the development of new rules for this game asked for clubs adapted to this game. The first difference was that the length of the club head increased from less than 10 centimetres to around 15 centimetres.

In the course of the years the perfectionism of the sport asked for specific balls and clubs, and these clubs were and are still called klieks.

## *Conclusion*

A lot of information about the equipment used in the very popular game of colf as played in the Low Countries is provided from archaeological research in towns and from the metal detector findings in the countryside on waste land, agricultural land and filled-up canal moats, as well as from archaeological research in shipwrecks and of course the very many paintings of colf players through the centuries. Unfortunately the woods of the shafts could not withstand the passage of time but the iron club heads are still found very regularly, and they show that the colf game must have been very popular. It is peculiar that not much is written about the game during these centuries. Even more astonishing is that no educated historians, historic societies, universities, etc. have ever shown any interest in the history of this game. It took a hundred years before the Netherlandish Golf Federation took some basic action to safeguard the history of golf, including (marginally) the amazing history of the game of colf.

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*For several years a Colf & Kolf Museum has been open on the internet. The website [www.colf-kolf.nl](http://www.colf-kolf.nl) was developed by Do Smit. In the museum one can see an astonishing number of pictures of ancient documents, paintings, drawings, game equipment, memorabilia, etc. Although the accompanying texts are in Netherlandish, many of the pictures speak for themselves.*