

The Flemish and the game of golf

This blog posting, prepared by Geert and Sara Nijs, draws on the work of several golf historians who have examined the possible influences of the Flemish and their game of colf on the origin and development of Scottish golf. Flemish (and North Netherlandish) colf and Scottish golf had much in common. Players used a stick (club) to hit a (originally) wooden ball towards a target like a hole in the ground, a door, or a tree. The player who could reach that target in the fewest number of hits was the winner of the match.

Background

The history of the Scottish game of golf has been studied more extensively perhaps than any other game. For over hundred and fifty years the history of golf has been unravelled and explained in a range of publications. Books on golf history reveal that there is a surprising difference of opinion about the game's origin. On the one hand well-respected, mainly Scottish historians claim the one and only cradle of golf to be in Scotland. On the other hand well-respected, again mainly Scottish historians claim the cradle of golf to be in the Low Countries (and sometimes in Italy, France, and other countries). This posting is restricted to the Low Countries' cradle claim with the main emphasis on Flanders and the Flemish. All of the historians quoted below are referenced at the end of the text and no attempt is made in this particular blog posting to examine the veracity of their claims or to weigh the relative merits of different theories regarding the origin of the game.

Scottish golf

Golf started to be played on the east coast of Scotland, principally in the East Lothian and Fife regions. The game was mentioned for the first time in 1457 when by an Act of the Scottish parliament King James II banned golf (together with football) in favour of practising archery:

Item it is ordanyt and decretyt ... (th)at ye fut bawe and ye golf be uterly cryt done and not usyt and (th)at ye bowe markes be maid at all parochkirks apair of buttes and shuting be usyt ilk Sunday ...¹

The first mention of a specific 'round' of golf dates from 1503 when King James IV played with the Earl of Bothwell near Edinburgh.² Subsequently numerous documents have been found that refer to the game in Edinburgh, Musselburgh, St Andrews, Montrose, Aberdeen and many other places. In 1744, the first rules for the game were written down in Edinburgh. Playing golf remained mainly a Scottish game until the late 19th century when it began to be played in other parts of the world.

Flemish colf (Flanders, Brabant)

In the County of Flanders and the Dukedom of Brabant in the Southern Netherlands, colf was mentioned for the first time in 1261 by the Flemish poet Jacob van Maerlant in his poem 'Merlijn's Boec' (Merlin's book³):

*Vnde gaff den rikesten enen slach
Van den dorpe dat he lach
Mit ener coluen vor zine schene*

(A rough translation of the above extract from Maerlant's poem is: "...and hit the richest boy of the village with a colf against his shin")

Many documents from the 15th and 16th centuries refer to the game played in Brabant (Brussels, Antwerp, Malines, etc.) and Flanders (Brugge [Bruges], Gent [Gand], Kortrijk, etc.). The history of Flemish and Brabant colf in the 17th century has never been fully researched.

'Dutch' colf (Northern Netherlands)

In the County of Holland in the Northern Netherlands, the same game seems to have been played in Loenen aan de Vecht in 1297 to celebrate the lynching of Gerard van Velsen, the murderer of the Count of Holland a year before.^{4,5,6} In the subsequent four centuries there were many documents relating to the game that were found in Veere, Dordrecht, Haarlem, Leiden, Amsterdam and other places. The first, more or less official colf course was assigned to the colvers of Haarlem by Count Albrecht of Holland in 1389.^{7,8} Official rules for the game were never written down. Colf ceased to exist at the beginning of the 18th century to be succeeded by an indoor version called 'kolf' which is still played today but only in a small part of Holland.

Flemish colf and Scottish golf

The oldest reference in golf history books to a possible Flemish/Northern Netherlandish connection to Scottish golf highlights the fact that the two games have identical names: colf (noun), colven (verb) and golf (noun), golfing (verb). Some historians are of the opinion that because of the much older name of colf the Flemish/Northern Netherlandish people must have introduced their game into Scotland before the 15th century, where it became known as Scottish golf.⁹

When William, Duke of Normandy, set sail with his army in 1066 to conquer Britain he was accompanied by a group of Flemish knights. These knights played a prominent role in defeating the Anglo-Saxon King Harold. Many of these knights were rewarded by the new king with estates and fiefs often near the borders with Wales and Scotland to defend England against the Welsh and Scots. Reportedly these Flemings continued to play their game of colf which is said to have been very popular at that time in Flanders.¹⁰

When David I became king of Scotland in 1124, his wife Maud, of Flemish descent, followed him as his queen. They were accompanied by a large retinue of Maud's Flemish kinsmen.¹¹

Some golf historians believe that these Flemings continued to play their game of colf as they were gradually absorbed into Scottish society. When in 1154 King Henry of England expelled all aliens as encroachers on English trade, many Flemings sought fortune and refuge in Scotland.¹² They were well received in Scotland because of their skills as wool merchants and professional weavers. It could well be that these Flemish incomers played Flemish colf too. Some historians believe that over the course of time the Flemish game of colf evolved into the Scottish game of golf.

That golf developed on the east coast of Scotland in the 15th century, and not on the west coast is, according to some historians, due to the fact that fishermen from Flanders and Holland when fishing for herring in the North Sea found refuge in the harbours of East Scotland. While waiting for favourable winds to return home they killed time by playing 'mit der coluen' (colf). The Scots began to play the game also, sewing the seeds of Scottish golf.¹³



Scottish traders crossed the Channel regularly to do business with their counterparts in the Low Countries. As this painting shows, already in the 17th century golf was a good context in which to discuss business. – Adriaen van de Velde, 1668; National Gallery, London

Over the centuries there have always been close commercial relations between the Flemish and Scottish peoples. In the course of commercial interchange it is probable that those who played the game exchanged information about the rules, the use of different clubs and balls, etc. Many documents show that in the 16th and 17th centuries large numbers of hair-filled leather balls were exported to Scotland to replace the wooden balls. On several Netherlandish paintings with colf players clubs can be recognised as 'Scottish cleeks'.¹⁴

In the Scottish golf game the target in a match is a small hole in which the ball has to be putted¹⁵. The first Scottish reference to such a hole target can be found in the 'Vocabula Latinæ Linguae' written by David Wedderburn from Aberdeen in 1633.^{16,17}



One of the oldest Flemish illuminations with colf players putting a ball into a small hole. It could well be that the Flemish introduced such a target into Scottish golf. – 'Golf Book of Hours' by Simon Bening from Brugge (Bruges). Add MS 24098, detail from folio 27 recto, c.1540; © The British Library Board

In Flanders such target holes were in use already in the 15th century judged by several illuminations in books of hours and paintings and drawings from the 16th and 17th centuries.

Written evidence can be found in the ‘Tyrocinium Linguae Latinae’ from Petrus Apherdianus from 1545.¹⁸ Some historians are of the opinion that the Flemish colf target predated its introduction into the Scottish golf game.¹⁹

Among the other theories historians have developed to explain the spread of the game from continental Europe to Scotland relates to the exploits of Scottish mercenaries. According to this theory it could have been possible that the Scots were confronted with the colf game on the continent when they fought with the French against the English in the Hundred Years’ War. On the eve of the battle at Vieux Baugé in 1421 during the Hundred Years’ War between France and England, some Scottish soldiers were playing a ‘French’ ball game during a ceasefire.²⁰ The game is considered to be the game of crosse, a variant of Flemish colf. The soldiers enjoyed the game so much that when they returned to Scotland they took the game with them where it developed into golf. Scottish soldiers campaigned in France between 1420 and 1457 being the period in which it is suggested that golf developed in Scotland.²¹

Conclusion

There is documented evidence, supported by paintings of the period, that in the 14th century a “one stick and ball” game was played in both Flanders and the Netherlands. There is also some documented evidence that such a game was played in Scotland in the 16th century. One possibility therefore is that over the course of time the Flemish introduced aspects of their game into the Scottish game that evolved into the game of golf as it is played today. Another possibility is that comparable stick and ball games evolved independently in Flanders, the Netherlands and much later in Scotland. With the flow of people in the context of the commercial relationship between the three countries it is possible that there was an exchange of knowledge about the game that led to adaptations in the way it was played.

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For more detailed information about the history of the continental golf-like games and Scottish golf see their website www.ancientgolf.dse.nl where you also find their email address.

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