

Golf History for Golf Historians & Collectors

by
Sara and Geert Nijs



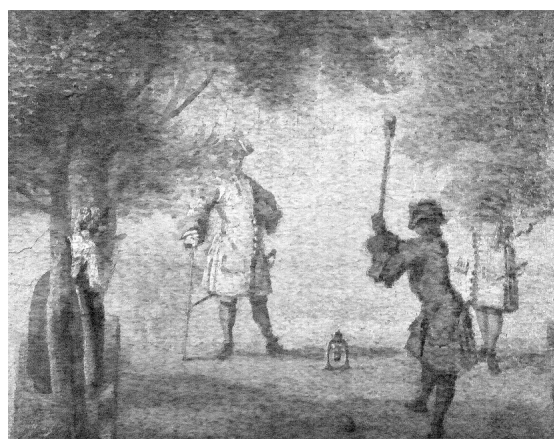
It happened on a Saturday morning, a dozen years ago, in our then hometown Eindhoven in The Netherlands. When we came back from the market for buying some fresh fruit and vegetables, we passed a small 'brocante' (antique and curiosity) shop. In the shop window we saw an old rusty 'wooden' golf club. Because at that time we were looking for a birthday present for a golf-addicted friend we thought that such a club would be a nice gift. We entered the shop and after some bargaining we left the shop with that rusty club under the arms.



At home we noticed, after some polishing and under skimming light (the club had to look a bit decent as a present), different marks, signs and characters on the back of the club head and on the shaft. Our interest was aroused. We jumped onto the Internet and found a 'mer à boire' of information about ancient golf clubs, golf balls, etc. When a few days later I told my golf mates about that rusty club, one of them gave me a booklet, called 'Early Golf' from a certain Steven van Hengel, written in 1982.

After reading a few pages in this book about the Flemish/North-Netherlandish game of colf, we were hooked forever on the history of Scottish golf and its 'look-alike' colf, once played in the Low Countries. Studying on the Internet we learnt that in Western Europe there happened to be two other, more or less, golf-like games: jeu de mail in France and jeu de crosse in Southern Belgium and Northern France.

We found out that the so-called 'Noble Jeu de Mail' died already hundreds of years ago, after an existence of a few hundred years.



Also the game of colf, as we learnt from the book of Steven van Hengel, died more than 300 years ago. When this game ceased to exist around 1700 after more than 400 years of existence a new game became popular, the indoor game of 'kolf' in which hardly the original colf game could be recognised.

The third game, the so-called game of choules, appeared to be still alive, somewhere around the city of Mons in Belgium and the city of Maubeuge in France. The choules region was only a few hours' drive from our hometown. So why didn't we have a look? Well, that was easier said than done. It took quite a while to find out that in Belgium the game was played around the small town of Baudour, in the old mining district of the Borinage. In Baudour, nobody had ever heard of the game. We asked the post office, the bakery, people in the street.

In vain. At last at the butchers, after a lot of discussions with customers in the shop, the butcher thought that some elderly people played a peculiar game somewhere at the other side of the canal behind the industrial estate.



It still took us more than an hour to locate the field, where we indeed saw some people playing a golf-like game. We parked the car, entered the clubhouse, explained who we were and why we were there, and we were given a very hearty welcome.

We were absolutely thrilled with seeing men playing with very peculiar sticks and wooden, 'egg-shaped' balls. We were invited to hold such a 'crosse' as they called the club and even to hit a few of these funny elliptical balls, which they called 'choulettes'. In the meantime, we were informed with great enthusiasm about the way in which the game was played. From that moment on, we fell in love with this wonderful but almost forgotten game which they called jeu de crosse or 'golf of the poor'.



We had to go deep into the archives, museums, antique bookshops and to talk to local historians, crosse players, etc. to get a fairly good image of this sport. While doing all this research, we started to wonder what could be found out about the game of mail and if there was more to say about the game of colf other than published by Steven van Hengel.

The moment we published our research about the 'Non-Royal but most Ancient Game of Crosse' in 2008 (and in 2012, its adaptation 'Jeu de Crosse – Crossage' in the French language) we could not wait to go into the history of these two games too. The more we found, the more similarities (and specific dissimilarities) we discovered between colf, crosse, mail and the history of Scottish golf.

The last hundred years much has been written about the 'modern history' of golf. Only a few historians have gone beyond the first Edinburgh golf rules, the gutta percha balls, Tom Morris and for the Americans beyond Bobby Jones. Our interest starts at the 'ancient' beginnings of the game and stops there where modern history starts. So after crosse, mail and colf we also put ancient golf in our research 'rucksack' and published our first findings in the book 'Games for Kings & Commoners' (2011).



Finally, while researching, we found several non-related club and ball games of which the existence and the history could be of value to find out more about the history of 'our own' games.

So our personal history developed in the course of a dozen years from buying just an old rusty golf club into a comprehensive history research program that has even taken us away from actual playing golf on the beautiful courses in Burgundy.



However, going into the archives of this world takes you to all kind of interesting places where you can enjoy the good things of life in the open.

