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## ST ANTHONY THE GREAT AND JEU DE CROSSE

By Geert & Sara Nijs

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Jeu de crosse is the last surviving relative of Scottish golf. Crosse is mentioned (under the erroneous name of 'choule'), together with the games of 'mail' and 'colf' in practically every book on the history of golf. As mail and colf already died ages ago, crosse is still being played by a few hundred crosseurs in the Belgian-French border region. The game is very ancient, and was already mentioned in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century.

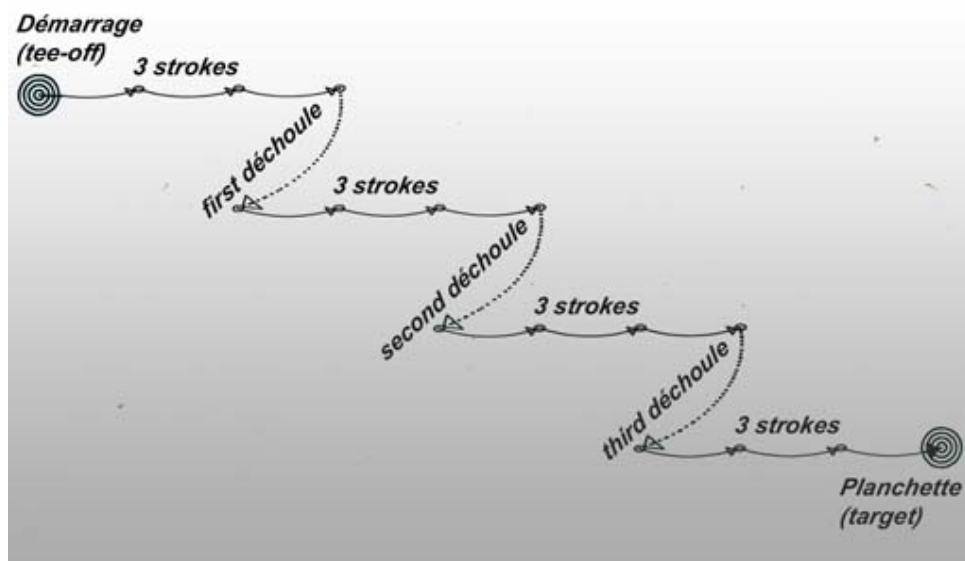
Today the game is played mainly on wasteland, pastures, etc. Crosseurs as crosse players are called, play with clubs (crosses), consisting of a wooden shaft with a metal head. The head combines in a very ingenious way two strike faces in one, a 'plat' face (long iron in golf) for distance and a 'pic' face (short iron in golf) for difficult lies.



With these crosses crosseurs hit an elliptical wooden ball, called a 'choulette' towards a target.



The game of crosse is a team sport (two against two). One team, the so called chouleurs try to reach the target (a metal plate of 180 x 18cm) within a number of strokes, decided upon beforehand. The other team, the déchouleurs, try to prevent that by hitting the ball away from the target. The teams hit the choulette in turn. The chouleurs hit three times, followed by only one hit from the déchouleurs.



As good Catholics, the crosseurs found themselves a patron saint, namely St Anthony the Hermit, also called 'the Great'.

### St Anthony, patron saint of all crosseurs

At the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, there was a hermit living in an area called 'Barbefosse' in the woods near the village of Havré. Havré is situated approximately ten kilometres east of the city of Mons (Bergen) in Wallonie, the French speaking part of Belgium. The hermit lived close to a small chapel, devoted to St Anthony the Abbot, also called the Hermit or the Great.



*The life-size statue of St Anthony in the chapel at Havré, worn out by the time but still worshipped as the candles and flowers show. When the crosseurs went on the pilgrimage to the chapel at Havré, a crosse (club) was placed in the right hand of the patron saint.*

This chapel was probably built in the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> century. It is said that already from that period people visited or made pilgrimages to the chapel to pray for protection, especially against the plague and other (contagious) diseases. We have not found any evidence that in that time, there were crosseurs who participated in these pilgrimages.

### St Anthony the Abbot, also called the Hermit and the Great

Anthony was born in Egypt in 251 A.D. He became a hermit in the Egyptian deserts, when he was 20 years old. According to tradition, Anthony had to fight many demons. He had many students whom he inspired through his personal life. Nevertheless, he remained a hermit and never founded a convent community.

Anthony died in the desert in 356 A.D. when he was more than 100 years old. His remains were brought to France, first to the priory St Didier de la Motte near Vienne and since 1491 A.D., he rests at Arles.

In folklore, St Anthony plays an important role. He is the patron saint of animals, farmers, butchers, brush makers and last but not least, all crosseurs. On 17<sup>th</sup> January, his name day, guilds and brotherhoods drank the traditional half-barrel of guild beer.

Many worshippers held a novena between 17<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> January.

St Anthony was invoked for protection against, or healing from, contagious diseases like the plague, gangrene, ergotism (St Anthony's fire) and various animal (especially pig) diseases.

St Anthony is mostly portrayed as a hermit; at his feet a pig and a flame are often depicted. He holds a bible in his left hand. St Anthony could read nor write. Miraculously he could read the bible.

It is known that in 1387 A.D., a severe contagious skin disease called 'dry gangrene' broke out. Many people went on a pilgrimage to the small chapel of St Anthony and the hermit, to pray for protection against, or healing from this disease.



*It is not easy to find the chapel of St Anthony; this sign, placed quite near the chapel, shows the direction. The sign also confirms the authorisation of the construction of the chapel, by pope Clemens VII in 1389. Regretfully there is no sign whatsoever about the connection between St Anthony and the crosseurs.*

Several sick people were cured miraculously and therefore the church authorities made the pilgrimage official. On 30<sup>th</sup> October 1389 A.D., pope Clemens VII gave permission to the Lord of Havré, knight Gérard d'Enghien, to build a larger chapel, devoted to St Anthony. The chapel was actually built between 1406 and 1409 A.D.



*The surroundings of the chapel of St Anthony have changed dramatically. Was the chapel originally situated in an open space in a forest, today the more than 600 years old chapel is surrounded by large buildings of an institute. However, in front of the chapel there is ample space for the few remaining crosseurs who would like to revive the patronage of St Anthony.*

In the Middle Ages, relaxation was very scarce. In summer, there was a lot of work to do on the land; in winter, there was more time available for other activities than just work. Therefore, the pilgrimages to the chapel at Havré were usually held in the winter period, mainly on Sundays. These religious feasts had also a profane side. When the ceremonies in and around the centre of worshipping had finished, people came together for the fair, to play games, to meet each other and to eat, drink and sing.

The main pilgrimage in which thousands of believers participated was held on the 17<sup>th</sup> of January, the actual name day of St Anthony, or the previous or following Sunday.



*The standard of one of the oldest crosse societies in Wallonie: the Royal Crosseurs Society of St Georges from the village of Erquelinnes. Such standards were probably carried when the crosseurs marched to the tournament fields.*

At the beginning of the pilgrimage all pilgrims assembled in the centre of Mons and left the city through the fields with beating drums and colours flying, praying and singing towards the chapel of their patron saint in Havré. Their banners, scarves, sashes and cocardes distinguished the crosseurs from the different estates and villages. Every crosseur proudly carried his crosse over his shoulder.



*The door of the chapel of St Anthony was the final target for the crosseurs. It is not clear if this door is the original from the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The wood does not carry any damage from the impact of the many choulettes.*

After the religious celebrations, attending the mass, kissing relics and singing religious songs, the crosseurs started to play their game in the fields around the chapel. The door of the chapel was the final target. The crosseurs played probably also 'target crosse' and 'the longest drive'.

The jeu de crosse pilgrimage became so popular that in the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century a certain Raoul de Longherowe, an old knight of the order of St Anthony, received approval to open a tavern in the vicinity of the chapel. This house still exists under the name of 'La Longue Roie', although not as a tavern anymore. There is still a small niche above the door nowadays containing instead of St Anthony the Abbot, the statue of St Anthony of Padova, the saint you pray to when you cannot find your golf ball in the rough.

When at sunset the games finished and an end had come to an animated day in the fields, prestigious medals were awarded to the most powerful and skilled players. The crosseurs then returned to Mons. In their midst the victors, proudly wearing the medals on their chest. A brass band or a group of tambours accompanied them with lighted torches, singing and making music. The first stop for many pilgrims was the tavern of Raoul de Longherowe, where the crosseurs drank on the victory or the defeat.



*The old tavern in the neighbourhood of the chapel, built by Raoul de Longherowe in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, still exists. In the small niche above the entrance a small statue of St Anthony is placed. However, it is not St Anthony the Abbot but St Anthony of Padova.*

The crosseurs passed through the streets of Mons, in the lights of the flambeaus, shouting: 'Vive Saint-Antoine'. They stopped at the tavern 'Chez l'Borgne (or l'Bagne)' in the Rue de Basse. Behind the window of the tavern a relief, depicting St Anthony, was placed with two lighted candles. The relief can still be seen in the 'Musée Folklorique' at Mons. Sadly the tavern does not exist anymore.



*The ancient relief of St Anthony, originally placed in the window of the tavern Chez l'Borgne (or l'Bagne) in the Rue de Basse at Mons, is now exhibited in one of the local museums. It is placed in a showcase in an unsightly corner; the personnel in the museum has no idea of the relationship between the relief and jeu de crosse. – Musée Folklorique at Mons.*

The conclusion of the day consisted of a traditional, copious meal of rabbit, sprinkled with lots of beer. The crosseurs entered the tavern to eat and drink to their hearts content. The weekly donations during the year supplied sufficient money for such a festive day. They sang the centuries old song:

*A Saint Antouaine*

*On the day of St Anthony*

*On va crocher*

*We are going to play crosse*

*Avee une soule et ein macquet*

*With a ball and a club*

*Vive Saint Antouaine*

*Long live St Anthony*

During the tournament and after the tournament, on their way back home (via several taverns) accidents occurred and fights regularly broke out. Council and church authorities had to interfere. In a text from 1478, authorities warned that measures would be taken to prevent these irregularities. In an item from the registry of the bailiff of Havré, dated 1775, the concern of the authorities about the irregularities is expressed: "The farmers cause breakage of the windows of the chapel." The authorities are of the opinion that crosseurs should not play anymore with iron crosses but that only wooden macquets may be used.

In 1846, Pierre Moutrieux, poet in Mons, wrote:  
*Last night, the society came together at Brock (a pub)*

*They had a pint to bless the flag*

*They drank, they laughed, they sang together:*

*Yes, St Anthony is really a beautiful day.*

According to local historians, St Anthony is the patron saint of all crosseurs since the jeu de crosse pilgrimage started at Havré. Today, in the chapel of Havré nothing reminds us of the remarkable jeu de crosse history of the chapel.

It is a pity that such a tradition, kept alive for hundreds of years, has vanished forever. The surroundings of the chapel have changed so dramatically that it is hardly possible to imagine how crosseurs went on a pilgrimage to St Anthony.

Originally, the pilgrimage and the crosse tournament were inseparable. In the course of time, diseases like the plague and gangrene disappeared and the worshippers stopped making pilgrimages to the chapel of St Anthony.

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However, the crosseurs continued to celebrate St Anthony, who had become the patron saint of all crosseurs. The feast of St Anthony became little more than a day of relaxation for the working people. Sadly, because of the diminishing interest in the game of crosse and the building activities around the chapel, the last St Anthony tournament was held in 1971.

The relationship between crosseurs and St Anthony is not limited only to the area around Mons. In 1873, Charles Deulin, the storywriter, wrote the tale 'Le Grand Choleur'. The leading character, Roger, who lived in a small hamlet near the town of Condé-sur-l'Escaut in French Flanders, was approached by two men. These men asked Roger if he could repair a crosse. When Roger asked who they were, the answer was: "I am St Peter and my companion is St Anthony, the patron saint of crosseurs".

The song 'A Saint-Antoine, etc.' was not only known in the Mons area. In 'La vie quotidienne dans le Nord au XIXème siècle' (Daily life in the department Nord during the 19th century), Pierre Pierrard described how, in the 19th century, hundreds of crosseurs, coming from all directions, played the game of crosse in the streets of Maubeuge (France) on Ash Wednesday.

After playing crosse during the day, they all had a large meal together, with herring, inevitably sprinkled with beer and wine. Traditionally, during the meal, the crosseurs proposed to meet again on the 17th January, the name day of St Anthony. They then sang loudly the St Anthony song. It is not mentioned if the crosseurs would go from Maubeuge to Havré on a 'jeu de crosse pilgrimage' or that they went to a St Anthony chapel in the surroundings of Maubeuge.

The text and music of the St Anthony's song have been lost in the mist of time.

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(Information derived from *Robert Dascotte – Religion et Traditions populaires dans la région du Centre, 1982; Léopold Devillers – La Chevalerie (knighthood) et le Prieuré (priory) de Saint-Antoine en Barbefosse, 1865; Félix Hachez – Fêtes populaires à Mons. Extrait du Messager des Sciences historiques de Belgique, 1848; Georges Larcin – La Province, 1973; Karl Petit – La chevalerie et le Prieuré de Saint-Antoine en Barbefosse, 1943; Pierre Pierrard – La Vie Quotidienne dans le Nord au XIX siècle, 1976; Musée Folklorique Mons, Belgium.*)