



The continental hole

On the continent, the games of colf and crosse were played originally in and around the towns at the same time or somewhat earlier than the golfers did in Scotland. The urbanisation of parts of the Low Countries began in the 13th/14th century, which was significantly earlier than in Scotland.

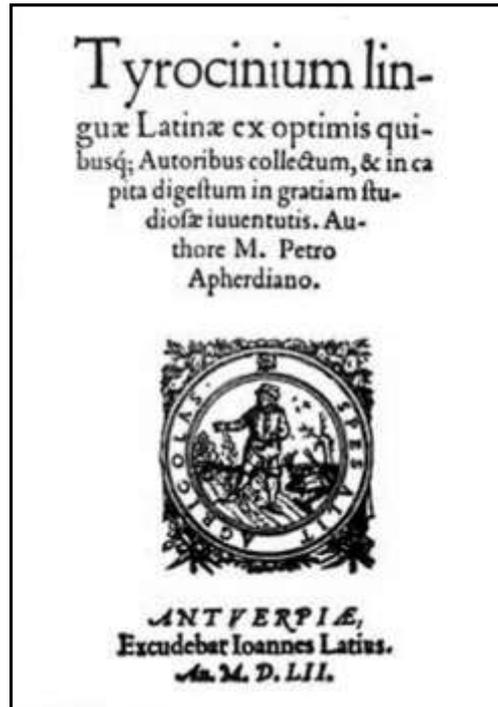
When, in many parts of Europe and Britain the urbanisation degree was less than 10%, in the county of Holland this degree of urbanisation grew quickly to almost 50%, while in the counties of Flanders and Brabant, more than 65% of the people lived in or near the towns.

Like the Scots, colvers played in the streets, churchyards and open fields in or near the town, where they probably used doors, walls, fences and where appropriate, holes in the ground as the Scots did.

Written evidence of the early games of colf and crosse is far more limited than the written tradition of early Scottish golf. A very interesting exception is the Netherlandish Latin Grammar book from 1545. The booklet contains the earliest proof that in the ancient forms of colf and/or crosse (also) holes were used as a target.



Frontispiece of David Wedderburn's 'Vocabula', 1636, in which he included the hole in the game of golf: 'Dirige recta versus foramen', meaning 'Strike directly upon the hole' – National Library of Scotland



Frontispiece of Pieter van Afferden's Netherlandish/Latin Grammar book, 'Tyrocinium lingua Latinae', written in 1545 and published in 1552, in which the colf section is called 'the game towards the hole' and one can read: 'I am not far from the hole' and 'I will hole the ball easily'. – Universitätsbibliothek Münster, Germany

A certain Peter van Afferden (in Latin: Petro Apherdiano), a schoolmaster from Amsterdam, prepared a Latin Grammar book for students of the Latin language. In his so-called 'Tyrocinium Lingua Latinae', Van Afferden included a series of phrases and conversations in Latin with their Netherlandish translations. Several of these sentences and phrases were about popular sports. His aim was to make the learning of Latin more interesting and easier. The section about the game of colf, called 'het spel nae de cuyl' (the game towards the hole), contains several colf related conversation lines. One of these phrases says: "Non multum a scrobe absum" (I am not far from the hole). Another phrase says: "Pilam facilein scrobum propellam" (I will hole the ball easily).

These phrases show clearly that before 1545 putting at holes was common practice in Netherlandish colf.

Tyrocinium was edited and printed in 1552 by the well known Antwerp printer Jan de Laet, almost 100 years before the publication of Wedderburn's 'Vocabula' (1636). The existence of the booklet had been forgotten for centuries, until it was rediscovered in the 1990s at the Universitätsbibliothek in Münster, Germany.

Olive Geddes was probably not yet aware of the find of the Netherlandish Latin Grammar book, when she wrote her 'Swing through Time' book in 1992, in which she refers to the 'Vocabula' from Wedderburn.

The Latin Grammar book became a bestseller. Within less than 100 years more than 25 adapted reprints were published, both in the Netherlandish and German language.

It is not known if Latin/English adapted versions were made and published. Could the 'Vocabula' be an English adaptation of one of the many editions of the 'Tyrocinium'?

Detail of an illumination in a Flemish manuscript, called 'The Golf Book', c.1500 in which a colf player is putting the ball into a hole. – Book of hours of Philip the Handsome – By courtesy of Real Colegio Seminario de Corpus Christi, Valencia, Spain



Contrary to the fairly limited written information about the ancient continental colf and crosse games, is the almost abundant availability of early pictorial information about these and other stick and ball games and their targets. The oldest pictures of stick and ball games are found in illuminations in religious books of hours, breviaries, calendars, etc. In the 15th and 16th centuries, many of these books were often commissioned by kings, dukes, counts and other nobility from various parts of Europe. Most of the illuminations were made by monks in Flanders, in Brabant and in what is now Northern France. These were the regions, where for several centuries the games of colf and crosse were played. These hand-written religious books were richly decorated. In these decorations, the so-called illuminations, sometimes players of different sports were pictured.

In several of these illuminations, colvers or crosseurs are shown who are finalizing their 'round' by putting the ball into a hole. Most of these 'colf/crosse' illuminations date from the end of the 15th century and the first half of the 16th century.

Michael Flannery, the author of 'Golf Through the Ages - 600 Years of Golfing Art' from 2004, found two new depictions of European players putting at holes in illuminations in prayer books from the 15th and 16th centuries.

The oldest depiction is from c.1480 in a Flemish book of hours. In the illumination, a colf player is in a kneeling position to putt his ball into a hole, scraped in the ice of a canal of a Flemish town.

The other picture is from the November folio of a religious calendar in a Flemish book of hours from around 1505, where a colf player sits on his knees to putt his ball into a hole.

The first secular picture of colvers playing colf and putting a ball towards a hole is from a pen and ink drawing from Lambert Lombard, an artist from Liège in Belgium, who lived and worked most of his life in Antwerp; the pen and ink drawing is made around 1540.

Page 57: Illumination in the so-called 'Other Golf Book', a book of hours written and illuminated by a Flemish artist around 1510. In this illumination, a player on his knees is putting a ball into a hole. In the background a player seems to make a teeshot at the next hole. – The 'Other Golf Book' of 1510, also called the 'book of hours of Charles V' or the 'Quaritch book of hours'. – From 'Golf Illustrated & Outdoor America', August 1915

All the ‘hole’ pictures, both religious and secular, show players who have taken a kneeling or squatting position, putting towards holes with their hands extremely low on the shaft. All hole players are using the ‘curved head’ or ‘iron face’ type clubs.

When, during the Little Ice Age in the 16th and 17th centuries, colvers moved to the frozen canals, rivers, lakes and ponds, it meant almost the end of the hole as a target in the game of colf. Stakes had taken its place.

Still, with some imagination a hole can be discovered in the ice, in some ‘winter scenes’ paintings from Netherlandish painters from the 17th century.

In a painting from one of the most famous winter scene artists, Hendrick Avercamp, a kind of ‘fore caddy’ is noticed, who points with a stick to a hole in the ice to direct the colf player the approach to the target. It goes without saying that when using a hole on the ice, the ice surface should be thick enough, otherwise holing out would be a costly affair because of loosing the expensive leather covered balls.

There exists an ancient Netherlandish saying that ‘de bal is aan de kuil gebracht’ (the ball is played near the hole), meaning: ‘the job is nearly finished’.

A pen and ink drawing with children playing colf, putting into a hole. – Lambert Lombard, 1550 – Cabinet des Estampes et des Dessins, Liège, Belgium





*Detail of a winter landscape by Hendrick Avercamp, a colf player is directing his ball to a hole in the ice. A fore caddy shows with a stick where the hole is.
Hendrick Avercamp, 'Winter scene with skaters by a windmill' – Private collection*