



The Schotse Kliek

Iain Forrester

reports on the Holy Grail of Dutch Colf/Golf Collecting

It has been written about, mentioned in poetry and can be seen in several of the world's most famous Dutch paintings, but the real thing has proved elusive to historians who have searched for it – until now. The head of a *Schotse kliek* has recently been found during excavations in the historic Dutch university city of Leiden. The engineering company IDDS bv from Noordwijk found a wooden artefact in an ancient well. Initially the head was not recognized for what it was, but after some investigation and help from the Dutch *Colf* Union and the Dutch Golf Federation's Heritage Committee it was confirmed that a legendary club (head) had been found.

A unique find

The fact that the head was found in Leiden is significant, Leiden was known to be a centre of *colf* club making in the Netherlands, and the guild of *colf* club makers was formed there in 1660. The head of this club was made from timber of the maple/sycamore family *Acer sp.* and although dendrochronological dating of this wood is not possible, the archeologists involved, using other finds, have dated the head to be of the period 1650 to 1750; considering that *colf* became an indoor sport after 1700 it is likely that this is a seventeenth century artefact. The head of the club shows remarkable similarities to the earliest known wooden-headed golf clubs and we will make comparisons later in the article.

Colf was an outdoor Dutch ball and stick game which was played from the thirteenth century through to approximately

1700; after this time *colf* moved indoors and became the game that we now call *kolf*.¹ *Colf* clubs were called *klieks* and the similarity of this name to the Scottish word *cleek* is remarkable. *Klieks* had shafts of a strong but flexible wood (hazel or ash); the shaft was slightly thicker than those used for golf clubs; and a lead head (occasionally brass) was attached to the shaft (Fig. 1). These clubs were used on the land, and during 'the little ice age' around 1650, on ice. *Colf* being played on ice was the subject of many paintings by Dutch masters including Averkamp and Van de Velde. In the famous painting by Adrian Van de Velde (Fig. 2) one of the participants can clearly be seen playing with a club that looks more like a golf club than a *Colf* club; this player is also wearing a kilt and it has been presumed that he was either a Scottish soldier or a stranded Scottish sailor. Historians have often wondered if this club (the *Schots kliek*) had been brought to the Netherlands by the player or imported by Dutch traders.² No evidence has been found in Dutch trading records to indicate that Scottish golf clubs were ever imported in to The Netherlands and a third possibility has been considered, that the clubs were made in the Netherlands to a Scottish design.³

Made in The Netherlands or Scotland?

The fact that the recently found clubhead was made of sycamore is an important clue in solving this puzzle. Sycamore was a common tree in Northern Europe; it was used extensively in



Fig. 1 The lead head of a traditional kolf kliek head



Fig. 2 Winter scene with player in a Kilt, Adriaen van de Velde

the making of furniture in the middle ages. In the UK it was much less common and it has been suggested that the Romans may have brought the tree to Britain. The general consensus is that it was imported in small quantities in the Elizabethan period and became more common in the middle of the eighteenth century.⁴ In the Scottish clubmaking areas on the east coast very little maple was planted. Bob Gowland's book *The Oldest Clubs* does not mention Sycamore as a timber that was used in Scottish clubmaking, suggesting that it is more likely that the recently-found clubhead may have been made in the Netherlands, either by a Scottish craftsman or a Dutch artisan.⁵

Looking at the clubhead in more detail, (figs. 4, 5, 6 and 7) the general shape of the club is similar to the Adam Wood clubs on display in the British Golf Museum, although the toe end is blunt rather than pointed. The dimensions of the head are 6.9 inches (length of sole) by 2.8 inches (width) by 1.07 inches (depth), comparing with the average dimensions of the Adam Wood clubs of 6.29 inches x 2.25 inches x 1.18 inches. The dimensions are also similar to the description found in the 1657 poem of Joannes Six van Chandelier, *The Winter of an Amsterdam Citizen*, of three fingers wide and one finger thick.⁶ The head would have been attached to the shaft by a classic scare splice and stabilized with pitched thread. (Fig. 3) The head was weighted with lead using a method that represented one of the main differences between this head and Scottish versions. The lead had been poured into a smallish cavity in the back of the head about the size of the Scottish equivalent. But whereas in contemporary Scottish clubs the lead at the back of the clubhead was fixed by filling three connecting channels that are set at different angles, those channels extended through to the face of the *Schotse kliek*. The painting by Jan Steen of Leiden (1625–1679) clearly shows a child holding a *Schotse kliek* that has been weighted with two

small lead pellets.(Fig. 3) The lead is visible on the face of the club. It follows that an adult club would have needed extra lead to bring it up to weight. The second difference is that no horn has been added to protect the sole of the club. This may not have been necessary for playing from smooth ice.

The combination of the timber used, the alternative method of placing lead in the head and the lack of horn makes



Fig. 4 *The Schotse Kliek, face on*



Fig. 5. *The Schotse Kliek, from behind*



Fig. 6. *The Schotse Kliek, from above*



Fig. 7. *The Schotse Kliek, Sole*



Fig. 3 *Schotse kliek (expanded) from the Sinterklaas celebration by Jan Steen*

it more likely that the design of *Schotse klieks* was inspired by Scottish clubs but executed in Holland by Dutch clubmakers

The clubhead has a loft of approximately five degrees and its lie angle is approximately 45 degrees. This lie angle is significant because it means that the shaft of this club would have been longer than a Dutch *colf* club and the player would have had to use a different technique. Thomas Kincaid, the Edinburgh medicine student mentions in his 1687 diaries that the ideal swing plane was at 45 degrees to the horizontal; that swing would have worked perfectly with this club.⁷ Interestingly, Kincaid learnt the Dutch Language at this time in preparation for continuing his studies in Leiden. The University there was considered to be a European centre of excellence for its Law faculty;⁸ it is thought that around 2000 Scottish students studied in Leiden between 1600 and 1800.⁹ Considering that these would have come from the upper echelons of Scottish society it is possible that many of them would have played golf and may have been the source of inspiration for the *Schotse klieks* in The Netherlands.

The clubhead has been preserved by freeze-drying and will be transferred to the Dutch province of South Holland's archeological depot in early 2018, and it is hoped that further investigation will be possible when it reaches its new location.

Discussion about the origins of golf and the influence of European ball and stick games in its development have been going on for more than 100 years. This find adds to the story in an unusual way. It is just about possible that the oldest

wooden-headed golf club may not have been made in Scotland, although it is equally possible that the club in question was never used to play the game of golf at all.

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BGCS member Iain Forrester is a member of the Royal Dutch Golf Federation Heritage Committee