

Miners and jeu de crosse

Miners have probably played an essential role in the survival of the game of crosse in the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries.

There is an interesting similarity between the miners and their game of crosse and the Scottish freemasons and their game of golf.



The freemasons in Scotland played golf to whet their appetite. The poor miners in French and Belgian Hainaut played crosse to breathe some fresh air after working six days a week more than 12 hours per day in a most unhealthy and dangerous environment. The contrast can hardly be more significant. – 'Dans le Borinage', Marius Carion



William St. Clair of Roslin was the first Grand Master Mason of the Grand Lodge of Scotland in 1737. He was also a captain of the Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers. – Painting by Sir George Chalmers – Royal Company of Archers' Hall, Edinburgh, Scotland

The regular depiction of crosseurs on miniatures in books of hours and illuminated manuscripts supports the opinion that the game of crosse (in its many variants) must have been fairly popular in the 15th and 16th centuries.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, councils went forth many edicts and ordinances against playing the game in-town. They prove that people played it regularly and with (too) much enthusiasm in that time. Unfortunately, these bans did not contribute to lasting popularity.

Betting, swearing, drinking and fighting accompanied the game, as was the case with most other games. As a result, many disturbances and accidents occurred. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the church authorities tried to reduce the excesses in sports by incorporating sport meetings in the religious calendar. Often, they allowed playing games only on special feast days like Easter, Saint's Days, All Saints' Day and the days before the beginning of Lent. Especially the Carnival time was the feast period for sports fans.

A map of the coal mining region in Belgium and North France. This region, running from Charleroi in the east to Béthune in the west, covered a major part of the areas where people played crosse already for hundreds of years.



With the growth of the mining industry in the 19th century, tens of thousands of people came to the French-Belgian border region to work in the mines. To accommodate these many families in the previously rural areas, the mining companies hastily put up villages with endless rows of cheaply built cottages along beaten earth roads.

Men, women and children worked in the mines, six days a week, 12 to 15 hours per day in the most terrible working conditions, in the dark, dusty and dangerous mine galleries. Only on Sunday's the miners did not work. Sunday was the day of relaxation. This distraction consisted of gardening, fishing, the pub, occasionally funfairs and sports. Especially 'jeu de pelotte' (hand tennis) and 'jeu de crosse' were popular with the coal miners.

Coal mining in 'Le Borinage'

The history of the Borinage is closely related to the exploitation of coal. Coal mining started already around the year 1000 A.D. The coal veins, which were very close near the surface (Wasmes), were exhausted at the beginning of the 18th century.

Exploiting deeper coal veins in mine galleries caused significant gas and water problems. The invention of the steam engine (Newcomen 1704) solved the water problem: water could be pumped out of the galleries. In Pâturages, the mine owners installed the first pump engine in 1734.

Around 1850, the Borinage reached its peak of coal production. However, the mine gas remained a problem; the mines of the Borinage were the most dangerous in Europe.

After the Great War (1914-1918), foreign coal entered the market. The decline of the local exploitation started with the reduction of salaries and the closing of several mines. The number of mining personnel, more than 100.000 in 1924, reduced to half that number in 1934.

After the Second World War (1939-1945), when Europe had to rebuild its economy, there was a great demand for coal. The mining profession was not very attractive anymore. Hence, foreign workers were recruited, especially Italians, Spaniards and Greeks. The percentage of foreign workers amounted to 75%.



Coalmines with their big slag heaps dominate the landscape of the Borinage, like the Héribus in Cuesmes. – <https://www.visitmons.be>

In 1951, Belgium signed the Treaty of the European Community of Coal and Steel, which opened the borders for importing cheaper foreign coal. As a result, all mines closed successively; the last mine in the Borinage was closed in 1984.

This painting shows the attributes of most miners, being a helmet, a lamp, a red scarf, a stone bottle of genever and a crosse club with a few choulettes. – R. Verkens – Private collection



The management of the coal mines encouraged the miners to play crosse on Sundays to breathe in some fresh air.

In the second half of the 19th century, socialism emerged in the coal-mining region, and the first signs of secularisation became notable. Churches lost their grip on the mining communities. Miners did not accept the church rules about playing games only on religious feast days anymore. Among the more than 150,000 miners, several thousand played the game of crosse regularly on winter Sundays, in the fields and wastelands near the mining compounds.



Working up to 14 hours per day, six days per week, miners did not see any daylight during the week, especially in winter. On Sunday, the only day off, the miners worked in their vegetable garden, went fishing, drank too much in the company's café, or played a healthy game of crosse in the fields near the 'corons' (housing compounds). – <http://www.fossiliraptor.be/Une-journee-dans-la-vie-d-un-mineur.htm>



*The artist Marius Carion lived and died in the Belgian Borinage. In his work, he showed the charm of old miners customs, but also the sadness and poverty of the mineworkers and the environment of the Borinage. Many of his works can be seen in the museums at Tournai in France and in Belgium in Mons, La Louvière, Charleroi, Namur, Brussels, Spa, Liège.
– Les crosseurs,
Marius Carion*

Miners did not refrain from participating in the Carnival *crosse en rue* game. Generally, the mines were only closed on Sunday. However, when in bad economic times, the coal stocks piled up, and the mine management reduced working days. Many mining companies had this reduction coincide with the festivities around Carnival.

Miners then joined in the *crosse en rue* festivities in the surrounding villages in the Borinage. The wooden mallets and the large wooden *choulettes* were made beforehand in the mine woodworker shops.

After the war, the game of *crosse* began to lose much of its glory. Immediately after the end of the war, the demand for coal increased to rebuild Europe. However, the mining profession had lost much of its attraction to local people. Therefore, the mining companies recruited thousands of workers outside Belgium and France. More than 70% of all coal miners were Italians, Spaniards, Greeks, Poles, North Africans, etc. These foreign workers were not interested in the traditional game of *crosse*.

With the foundation of the European Community of Coal and Steel, the mines were closed one after the other. The ex-miners returned home or found work in new industries in or outside the region.

Pinewood posts supported the ceilings of the galleries in the mines. The enormous pressure compressed the wood tremendously. Miners discovered the resilience of this wood, ideal for processing choulettes. – <https://www.stockvault.net>



A home-made device, obsolete for quite some years, to press wood for the artificial 'stape' choulette.



The coal miners were the inventors of the 'stape' choulette. Crosseurs made their choulettes from oak wood, elmwood, dogwood, etc. The most attractive choulette was the 'buis' (boxwood), giving more distance than the other choulettes.

Pinewood posts supported the roofs of the mine galleries. The enormous pressure compressed the wood compressed tremendously. After the closing of the mines, the compressed pine wood posts became obsolete.

Crosse playing coal miners discovered the resilient properties of this wood for producing 'long distance' choulettes.

The 'stape' choulette became very popular in the game of crosse, although the availability was limited. When the supply of compressed mine wood ran out, crosseurs started to produce artificial 'stap' choulettes; they compressed all kinds of wood by self-made pressing machines.

Because of the availability of coal, energy-consuming industries flourished in and around the coal basins. Tens of thousands of people found employment in the glass and iron industry. Remarkably, we found no information concerning these industry workers playing the game of crosse in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Coal mining in 'Nord – Pas-de-Calais'

The first discovery from the minable coal in northern France dates from 1720 in Fresnes s/Escaut. The coal veins were a continuation of the veins on the other side of the border in the Borinage. Unfortunately, the success of the exploitation was of short duration because water constantly flooded the mine galleries. Moreover, the coal from this particular vein was unsuitable for most applications.

In 1734, a rich vein of coal was discovered at a depth of 500 meters at Anzin. The exploitation of this vein was the beginning of the coal industry in Nord – Pas-de-Calais.

The discovery and exploitation of coal in northern France happened 500 years later than on the other side of the border. The reason was that the coal veins in the Borinage were found immediately below the surface, while in France, the vein was 500 meters deep.

Between 1734 and 1990, hundreds of thousands of people worked in more than 600 pits. The coal industry expanded tremendously in the 19th century, as industry and railways grew throughout Europe.



*Stained glass windows in the town hall of Bruay-La-Buissière in the most western part of the mining region of northern France. We did not find any leads that miners played crosse here, outside the Hainaut area. –
<https://andredemarles.skyrock.com>*

After the 1920s, heavy competition provoked a cutback of salaries, and several mines were closed.

After the Second World War, when Europe had to rebuild its economy, demands for coal increased again. Local people did not want to work anymore in the mines, so workers from Italy, Poland, North Africa, etc., were recruited.

When France joined the European Community for Coal and Steel, which opened the borders for cheaper coal, it marked the end of coal exploitation in northern France.

The last coal mine was closed in 1990.

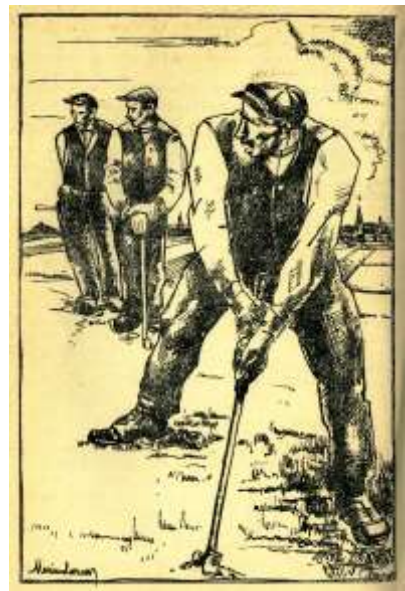
Expressions in literature or art of miners playing crosse are limited:

- ◆ Emile Zola (1840 Paris – 1902 Paris) described in his novel 'Germinal' (1885) a crosse match between Zacharie, Mouquet, and two cronies. The knowledge about the game, which was probably unknown to him, he acquired during a visit to Anzin, north of Valenciennes (France).
- ◆ Achille Delattre (1879 Pâtutages – 1964 Baudour) published several books about the world of miners and mining. In his book 'Histoires de nos corons' (Histories about our mining villages, 1939), illustrated with drawings from the artist Marius Carion, he told a story about 'La bonne partie de crosse' (A good game of crosse).
- ◆ Anto Carte (1886 Mons – 1956 Brussels), a member of the 'Nervia' group, made the engraving 'Les Crosseurs'.

Anto Carte made this print in 1923 for people who had moved from Mons to Brussels and who couldn't forget the game they played for years – Private collection



- ◆ Marius Carion (1898 Blaugies –1949 Wasmes) made an engraving of miners, playing 'crosse au but' (see pages 1 and 6). He made a drawing to illustrate Delattre's story about the miners playing crosse in the fields.



The illustration made by Marius Carion for the story about the game of crosse in 'Histoires de nos corons' by Achille Delattre.– Editions "Labor", Paris - Brussels, 1939