

St Anthony The Great And Jeu De Crosse

The ancient club and ball game of crosse survives in the border region of Belgium and France. Geert and Sara Nijs discuss its history.

THE LAST SURVIVING RELATIVE of Scottish golf is *Jeu de crosse*. Crosse is mentioned under the name *choule*, together with the games of *mail* and *colf* in practically every book on the history of golf. Though *mail* and *colf* 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 mentioned as long ago as the early fourteenth century.

The Game

Today the game is still played on wasteland and pastures. *Crosseurs* play with clubs (*crosses*), consisting of a wooden shaft with a metal head (Fig. 1). The head ingeniously combines two strike faces in one: a *plat* face (long iron in golf) for distance and



Fig. 1. The crosse has an ashwood shaft and a forged iron head with two strike faces. The elliptical *choulette* is made of hornbeam and measures 4.4 x 3.6 cm. The weight is approximately 28 grams. The surface of the *choulette* has five shallow grooves to improve flight characteristics. Distances of over 100 metres can be reached. On the Belgian side of the border, *crosseurs* experiment with nylon *choulettes*, with which distances of over 200 metres can be achieved.

a *pic* face (short iron in golf) for difficult lies. With these clubs *crosseurs* hit an elliptical wooden ball, called a *choulette* towards a target – a metal plank, called a *planchette* measuring 180 cm high and 20 cm wide (Fig. 2).

Crosse is a team sport (two against two). One team, the *chouleurs*, tries to reach the target within a pre-determined number of strokes. The other team, the *déchouleurs*, tries 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*.

St Anthony, patron saint of crosseurs

As good Catholics, the *crosseurs* found themselves a patron saint, namely St Anthony the Great. At the

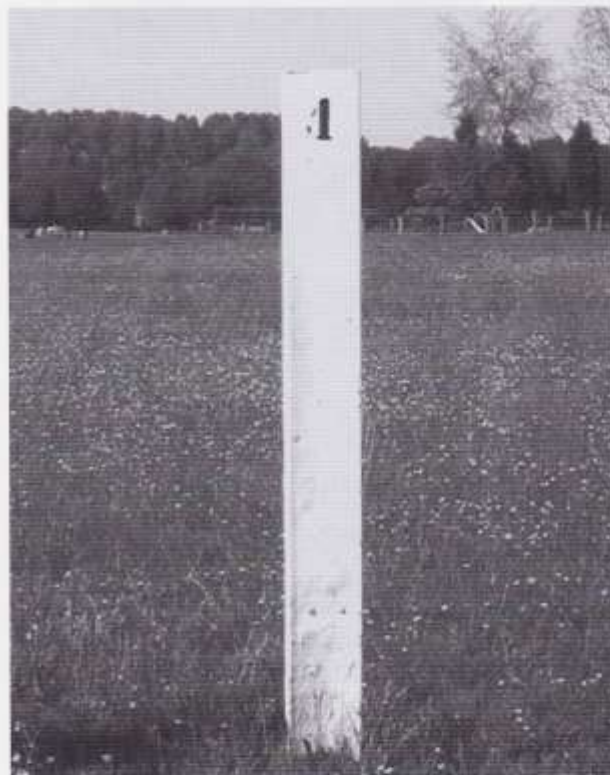


Fig. 2. The *planchette* as used on most *crosse* fields is 180 cm high and 18-20 cm wide. Originally, a hole, a door, a wall, a tree or whatever was used as a target

end of the 14th century, a hermit lived in the woods near the village of Havré, about ten km east of Mons (Bergen) in Wallonie, the French-speaking part of Belgium. He lived close to a small chapel, probably built in the 10th or 11th century, devoted to St Anthony the Abbot (also called 'The Hermit' or 'The Great'). At that time people visited or made pilgrimages to the chapel to pray for protection, especially against the plague and other diseases. We have not found any evidence that in that time, there were *crosseurs* who participated in these pilgrimages.

In 1387 AD, an epidemic of a severe contagious skin disease called 'dry gangrene' broke out. Many people went on a pilgrimage to the small chapel of St Anthony to pray for protection against this disease.

After several miraculous cures the church authorities made the pilgrimage official. On the 30th October 1389 AD, Pope Clemens VII gave permission to the Lord of Havré, knight Gérard d'Enghien, to build a larger chapel to St Anthony. This was built between 1406 and 1409 AD (Fig. 3).

Crosse on feast days

In the Middle Ages, work on the land during the summer left little time for relaxation. In winter, there was more time available for other activities. Pilgrimages to the Chapel at Havré were usually



Fig. 3. 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.

held on Sundays during the winter. These religious feasts had also a profane side. When the ceremonies in and around the centre of worship had finished, people came together for the fair, to play games, to meet each other and to eat, to drink and to sing. These feasts became major occasions for playing the game of *crosse*. The main pilgrimage in which thousands of believers participated was held on the 17th of January, the name day of St Anthony, or on the previous or following Sunday

At the beginning of the pilgrimage the pilgrims would assemble in the centre of Mons and leave the city, making their way through the fields towards the chapel of their patron saint, with beating drums and flying colours, praying and singing. Their banners, scarves, sashes and cockades identified the various estates and villages of the *crosseurs* (Fig. 4). Every *crosseur* proudly carried his *crosse* over his shoulder.

After the religious celebrations, attending the mass, kissing relics and singing religious songs, they also played the game in the fields around the Chapel, using the Chapel door as the final target (Fig. 5). The *crosseurs* also probably played 'target *crosse*' and 'longest drive'. The *jeu de crosse* pilgrimage became so popular that in the beginning of the fifteenth century a certain Raoul de Longherowe, an old



Fig. 4. 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.

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 Roïe, although it is no longer a tavern. 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 the games finished at sunset, medals were awarded to the most powerful and skilled players. *Crosseurs* then returned to Mons with the victors proudly wearing the medals on their chest. A brass band or a group of tambours accompanied them with lighted torches. The first stop for many was the tavern of Raoul de Longherowe, where they celebrated the day's play.

The *crosseurs* passed through the streets of Mons, shouting: 'Vive Saint-Antoine'. They stopped at the tavern Chez l'Borgne in the Rue de Basse. Behind the window of the tavern a relief of St Anthony was placed with two lighted candles. It can still be seen in the *Musée Folklorique* in Mons; sadly, the tavern no longer exists. The conclusion of the day consisted of a traditional meal of rabbit, sprinkled with lots of beer. Weekly donations provided throughout the year gave sufficient money for such a festive day. They sang the centuries old song:

*A Saint Antoine
On va crocher*

On the day of St Anthony
We are going to play
crosse

*Avec une soule et un
macquet*

With a ball and a club

Vive St Antoine

Long live St Anthony

During and after the tournament, incidents 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 this bad behaviour. In the registry of the bailiff of Havré, dated 1775, the authorities expressed their concern about the farmers breaking the Chapel windows and decided that *crosseurs* should no longer play with iron *crosses* but that only wooden *macquets* should be used.

End of the feast days

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 its remarkable *jeu de crosse* history. 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.



Fig. 5. 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 15th century. The wood does not carry any damage from the impact of the many *choulettes*.



Fig. 6. The old tavern in the neighbourhood of the chapel, built by Raoul de Longherowe in the 15th century, still exists. In the small niche above the entrance a small statue of St Anthony is placed.