

A present with a long history

Some time ago we were given a present of ancient 'slofs' (plural of one 'slof') as they are called in the Netherlandish language. Slofs are the metal heads of colf clubs used in the ancient golf-related game of colf. This game was played in the Low Countries between the 13th century and the end of the 17th century and is considered by historians as a possible forerunner of the Scottish game of golf.

These club heads were mainly made of a lead-tin alloy, although also copper and bronze were used.

There is no information about the locations where these slofs were found or about their age or where they were used. We suppose that the clubs were used around 1600, probably in the open fields somewhere in the County of Holland, part of the Low Countries, where the game was very popular.

After having a close look at the artefacts we concluded the following.



Sometimes metal detector hobbyists find such a precious trinket, but because they do not recognise the piece of metal as a colf slof they probably throw it away. What a shame!



This rather exceptional find of a small colf slof shows the opposite of what is often said: the game of colf was not played by boys and girls.

An all wooden colf club as toy for the youngest children, from the 17th century. Already at a very young age children started to learn how to hit a ball with a colf club. –

By courtesy of Schaatsmuseum, Hindeloopen, The Netherlands



The larger slof severely damaged possibly by a ploughing machine is made of lead or a lead-tin alloy, most common in that period of time. The club head is 9 centimetres long, 3.5 centimetres high and weights 250 grams. The loft of the face is approximately 10° – 15°. The shaft probably made of ash is missing, completely mouldered after hundreds of years. The club head with the ash shaft was used by an adult who was right-handed. At the end of the slof near the connection to the shaft a small simple line-decoration is visible.

There were two main periods in which the game of colf was played: in town and on land in the period between the 13th century and the end of the 16th century and in the 17th century also on the ice of frozen canals, harbours, ponds, rivers, etc. during the Little Ice Age. After 1700 the long game of colf was replaced by a short variant of the game as played on the ice but then played on small bordered courts. This short game called ‘kolf’ required much larger and heavier clubs (and balls).

The little slof, also made of lead or a lead-tin alloy, measures only 6 centimetres and the height of the face is 2 centimetres. The weight of the ‘mini’ slof is 75 grams. Here also the ash shaft has completely mouldered away. The loft of the slof is very upright, nearly as a ‘putter’ in golf. It could be that playing colf by children was limited to a kind of ‘putting game’, or that the boy or girl played on the ice where it was common to play a low ball.

At the back of the little slof a simple decoration is visible.

It is clear that the slof when fixed to the shaft was used by a right-handed child. It cannot be concluded by examining the slof if the young boy or girl played colf on land or on the ice. So the age of the slof cannot be defined exactly.

The find of this little slof shows that colf was not only played by adults, but also by boys and girls.

Till the beginning of the 18th century the game of colf has been very popular in the Low Countries. This is shown by regular finds of such metal club heads during archaeological excavations and by people who are looking for metal objects in the fields with their metal detectors.

If you want to know more about club and balls used in the ancient game of colf and in the game of kolf, why don't you pay a visit to the Web Museum of the KNKB (Royal Netherlandish Kolf Society) on www.colf-kolf.nl? Take your time; it is a very big museum.

An extensive research on clubs used in the ancient games of colf, crosse, golf and mail and on remarkable nautical colf findings will be included in our book 'Games for Kings & Commoners Part II', to be published in the course of 2014.



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Koninklijke Nederlandsche Kolfbond • Nederlandse Golf Federatie • St. Eloyen Gasthuis • NGA Early Golf

The colf and kolf museum is built by Do Smit, member of the 700 years old Saint Eloy Blacksmith Guild of Utrecht and member of the oldest (300 years) still existing Kolf Society Saint Eloy in Utrecht. The virtual museum contains the most extensive collection of documents, publications, drawings, paintings, tiles, equipment and collectables ever put together about the history of the long game of colf and its successor the short game of kolf.