

Rediscovering the Game of Pall Mall in the Gardens of the Palace of La Granja

Many of us, long-time strollers as well as newcomers in this almost private garden we have in La Granja, have noticed the existence of a strange double wall of curved ashlar masonry located at the end of the "Calle del Mallo", parallel to the "La Fama" parterre (see photo 1).



Photo 1. "Tambour" in the Game of Pall Mall

It turns out that this odd construction, a good walk away from the more popular areas, yet close to the fountain of "The Baths of Diana", bears witness to the preservation of the old **"Game of Pall Mall"** inside the Gardens.

What game or sport would require such a special feature? How was it played? Although its presence has been fully verified from the earliest plans of San Ildefonso, the chroniclers have contributed very little information about the game; barely a few elementary references to the use of "mallets and balls".

Allow me to enlighten you briefly on this subject, by courtesy of the enthusiastic research by a group of friends of La Granja, moved by curiosity into the subject, and in the hope that you are not too bored by it all.

Background

As we all know, the founding King of the Bourbon dynasty and the Royal Site was Louis XIV's grandson and son of the Dauphin of France. No wonder then that upon his arrival in Spain –with a stilted and declining court- and after the bloody war of succession, he imposed the ways he had known in the lavish world of the "Sun King". Not without difficulty, he managed to change many of the old ways, even reaching the realms of dress and food. His condition of Absolute King allowed this and more, even importing pastimes from the Versailles world.

One of these, very fashionable at the time, was the royal practice of the **"Game of Pall Mall"**: the future King Felipe V played with his father at Versailles and Marly, which is why he wanted to bring a game he enjoyed especially to Spain. Through the influence of the French court, its popularity had extended to the main royal houses of Europe. There are still places in France with the name **"Jeu du Mail"**, in Germany **"Palle Mallie"** and in the UK **"Pall Mall"**, all of which are derived from the Italian **"Palla Maglio"** (literally "ball-mallet").

The playing pitch, the rules and the equipment used

As was the norm in the royal houses of the 17th and 18th centuries, this sport was played on an extensive court, equipped specially for the purpose (see photo 2).

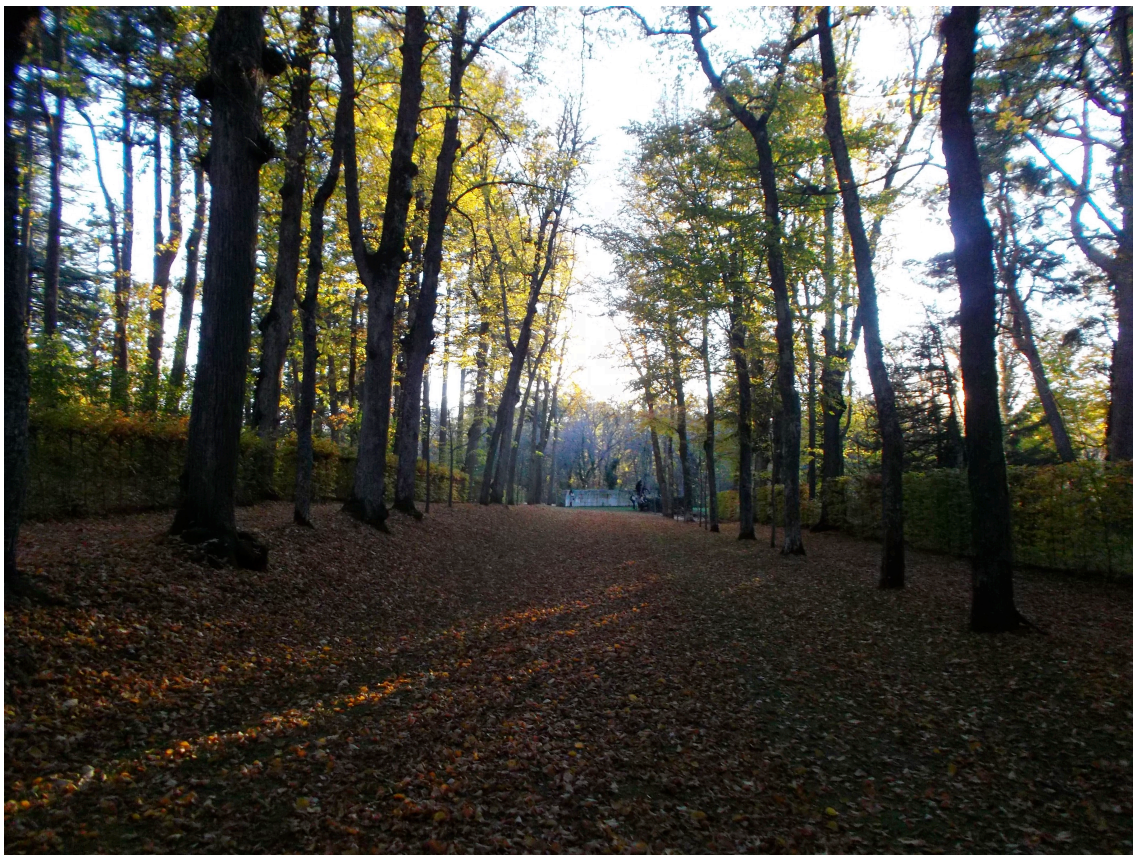


Photo 2. Longer section of the Game of Pall Mall

The pitch had no fixed dimensions. Depending on the characteristics of each royal garden or noble residence, the playing field could be more or less extensive or complicated, but the basic rules were the same in all of them. To be brief, the main fairway is a wide path limited by a wooden fence (about one meter high) on either side, the length depending on the size of each garden. In the case of Versailles, for example, there was both a **"Grand Mail"** and a

"Petit Mail", whose L-shaped designs served as a basis for the construction of the **"Mallo"** in La Granja and in the Buen Retiro in Madrid (considerably longer than ours). In other words, the pitch consists of a long path in two sections, the second of which is at right angles to the first one, to which it is joined by a **"tambour"**, the masonry construction I referred to earlier.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Juego del Mallo La Granja de San Ildefonso (Segovia). Bibliothèque nationale de France

The players were provided with a varied set of mallets, similar to those used for playing croquet but, unlike these, with flexible handles. So each player would hit his boxwood ball by knocking it as far as possible without it falling outside the bounds of the wooden fence. The player who managed to cross the line (in this case an **"archet"** or "hoop") in the lowest number of hits, won the game (Photo 3).



Photo 3. "Archet" or "hoop" for the Game of Pall Mall in La Granja

It was not just a game of strength; a degree of skill was necessary to manoeuvre the **"tambour"** stage and to be able to leave the ball in a favourable spot to tackle the next stage (those curious enough to go and see the "Mallo" in these Gardens will observe that the stone was carved or ground to give the wall the concave shape to achieve that goal). Another difficulty or twist to the game was that you were not allowed to tackle the "hoop" - and to knock the ball through it – until you had overcome a landmark called the **"pierre carrée"** ("square stone"), located forty paces ahead of the hoop.

The above description suggests a marked similarity with the game of golf. The basic rules I have mentioned were those used routinely by the royalty, but there were other ways to play: **"En partie"** (between teams), **"a la chicane"** (on open ground) or **"grands coups"** (longest hit); the iron-trimmed mallets were not blunt like those used for "croquet" but rather they were fashioned into different shapes and used depending on the shot to be taken. The terminology included "at par" or "below par". The nobles already had a **"porte lève"** who, in addition to the functions of today's "caddy", busied himself shouting "watch out!" just before his player knocked the ball. This last is not surprising given that the balls - at least those still preserved in the Palace dependencies - are three times larger than today's golf balls. They also used small devices to raise the ball off the ground for the first stroke, thus increasing their range.

Regardless of more or less biased nationalist controversies, the rules of the **"Game of Pall Mall"** were largely incorporated into the final regulations of the game of golf by the Scottish clubs, allowing them to boast of their paternity of the game.

The "Game of Pall Mall" at San Ildefonso-La Granja

This preamble serves to emphasize the importance of the fact that here, in La Granja, we would seem to have the finest **"Pall Mall Pitch"** that has survived to our day in recognizable form, and this fact alone warrants its complete restoration.

With the exception of distant memories of the game and the names of a handful of streets and avenues, there is no vestige comparable to those at La Granja in any of Europe's royal residences. The sport fell out of fashion and any hint of its presence seems to have been lost.

This is no exaggeration; the main elements of the game are preserved in "The Gardens" as designed according to the wishes of King Philip V.

In order to certify this assertion, we shall walk you round the site: upon entering the main gates and descending the steps that give onto the parterre of "La Fama", on the right side, we find a long, green walk limited by this parterre and the "Bosquete de la Melancolía" or "Forest of Melancholy". We are in the **"Mall Street"**. This wide avenue reaching as far as we can see is the long stretch of the Mall court.

A few dozen metres from our starting point, we find one of the features that was part of the game and which, surprisingly, has been preserved: in the middle of the path is the **"pierre carrée"** (Photo 4), whose purpose I have already explained. A perfectly square granite stone, this established the limit before which players were not allowed to try to knock the ball through the **"hoop"**.



Photo 4. "Pierre carrée" for the Game of Mallo in La Granja

Continuing some 290 metres along the avenue, we reach the double wall of the **"tambour"**. Recently (in April 2006) this area was dignified by the removal of an embankment which concealed it partially, built apparently because King Alfonso XIII used the "Calle del Mallo" for his equestrian diversion and used to jump the wall with his horse. This initiative was started by the current Trustee of Heritage in San Ildefonso and the enthusiastic support of the

Head Gardener. This move undoubtedly enables us to better explain the role of the **"tambour"** in the game as a whole.

It is important to note that it is at the end of this stretch and half-hidden by the undergrowth where another element of the game lies: the **"hoop"** or goal (Photo 3) through which players had to knock the ball to finish the game. It is also surprising that, after so many years in disuse, the hoop is unscathed and lodged deep in the ground. Another **"pierre carrée"** might possibly lie buried within forty paces of it, since the game could begin again in either direction.

Finally, I should like to say that it is marvellous to realise that King Philip V imported the **"Game of Pall Mall"** from France in the first third of the eighteenth century and that it is still among us as the only remaining example in Europe of this palace sport. Added to this is the fact that another foreign queen (Ena of Battenberg, Alfonso XIII's wife) caused the sport of golf to be introduced in La Granja in 1907 (only preceded, in peninsular Spain, by the British-built course in the mines of Rio Tinto and perhaps the Puerta de Hierro course in Madrid), so San Ildefonso should be considered one of the most emblematic places in the history of golf in Spain, both in its origins (the "Game of Mallo") and in its modern version.

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