



Geert and Sara Nijs

pose this interesting question and look for the answer

IN David Hamilton's *GOLF Scotland's Game*, a picture is shown of a frozen river near a sea-side town with people enjoying themselves on the ice (page 24 in the St Andrews Edition). The caption to the painting reads as follows: 'A stick-and-ball game played in the Dutch manner on the frozen river at Largs on the Firth of Clyde. This "winter" cartouche is from the painted ceiling of the Skelmorlie Aisle in Largs.' In the text of the chapter 'The mysterious years' in which the picture is shown, no references are made to the picture and no reasoning of the inclusion of the picture in this chapter is given.

As amateurs of the history of 'stick and ball games in the Dutch manner', which we usually call 'colf', we were very much intrigued by the picture and the explanation in the caption.

What do we know about Largs, the Skelmorlie Aisle, the painted ceiling and the picture of the 'stick-and-ball' players?

Skelmorlie Aisle, Largs, Ayrshire

Largs is a rather small, ancient town situated in North Ayrshire on the west coast of Scotland along the Firth of Clyde about 50 kilometres from Glasgow (Fig 1).



Fig 1 The town of Largs with its famous Skelmorlie Aisle, lies on the west coast of North Ayrshire some 50 km. from Glasgow. – <https://www.google.fr/maps>

In 1636, Sir Robert Montgomerie of Skelmorlie erected an aisle against the north side of the Old (13th century) Parish Church in honour of his lady, Dame Margaret Douglas. It served both as their place of worship and their final resting-place. The aisle was such a splendid creation that when the rest of the

church was demolished in 1802, it was saved from destruction. Today the Skelmorlie Aisle stands on its own, surrounded by old gravestones and partly hidden behind the ancient churchyard wall (Fig 2). The aisle contains a Renaissance canopied tomb of Italian marble which is unique in Scotland.



Fig 2 The Skelmorlie Aisle standing in the midst of the ancient churchyard in Largs. –

Photo by Rosser 1954, 2013 – Wikimedia Commons

The wooden ceiling of the barrel-shaped roof of the aisle was painted with forty-one individual compartments containing emblems, designs, human figures, animals, birds and heraldic representations. The four compartments in the corners contained landscapes, depicting the seasons: ver (spring), aestas (summer), autumns and hyems (winter). The spring season shows farmers, fishermen and hunters; the summer is presented with shepherds and farmers; the autumn shows barrels with grain and in the winter season the artist painted a frozen river and people with sticks skating on the ice.

The paintings were made by a certain James Stalker. When a drawing of the paintings was made in 1897, Andrew Lyons observed that the full-size design of the ceiling must have been very carefully drawn and pounces prepared before proceeding with the painting. Stalker signed and dated his work (Fig 3) in the panel showing a woman with a horse. It is the only example of decorative painting in Scotland of this period which its artist has signed.



Fig 3 James Stalker signed his painting in the Skelmorlie Aisle. No other signed paintings from him have been found in Scotland. – From 'The painted ceiling in the Montgomery aisle of the old church at Largs, Ayrshire', Andrew W. Lyons

Hardly anything is known about the artist other than that in 1632, James Stalker, son of David, was registered as an apprentice to John Sawers, painter at Edinburgh.

In his Ph D thesis 'Building the Reformed Kirk: the cultural use of ecclesiastical buildings in Scotland, 1560–1645', Graham Chernoff stated that Stalker demonstrated an awareness of Netherlandish painting in his landscape section of the ceiling.

From a golf- and colf-history point of view our interest was focused mainly on the 'winter season' depiction (Figs 4 and 5). We asked a local friend to make a high quality photograph of the painting, so we could analyse the image in more depth.



Fig 4 The ornate ceiling at the Skelmorlie Aisle in Largs (photogravure by Annan & Sons, Glasgow, c.1890) with in colour the 'hyems' (winter) compartment (photo by Ian Dalgliesh, 2015).

The picture clearly shows a village with a church, several houses and a bridge. In the fore front there is a frozen river and a boat with a red flag with a white St Andreas cross. To the right there is a rather rough sea. On the frozen river there are eight men playing, some of them seem to have sticks in their hands. The quality of the painting is such that even with the maximum enlargement it is very difficult to determine what kind of sticks are shown and to be more decisive about the game the people are playing.

It is possible that the seasonal presentations are taken from

real local life and that the pictures are from the town of Largs and its surrounding areas; only the summer depiction is definitely identified as being a view of Largs.

Could we find out, based on the painting itself, the whereabouts of the painter and the commissioner, the available knowledge about ancient games in Scotland, etc., which game is pictured here?

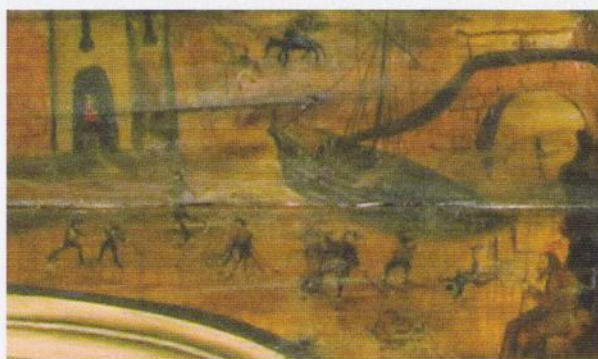


Fig 5 The presentation of the men on the ice is insufficiently clear to distinguish the kind of game these men were playing. – Detail of the winter scene in the Skelmorlie Aisle ceiling picture. – Photo by Ian Dalgliesh, 2015

Is it a colf painting?

David Hamilton concludes that the people were playing a 'stick and ball game in the Dutch manner'. We suppose that he meant the game of colf as it was played also on ice during the Little Ice Age (17th century) in the Low Countries. See publication 'Games for Kings and Commoners' Part Three Aug. 2015. How come that the Flemish or North Netherlandish game is depicted in West Scotland? In the 17th century, there was certain awareness in Scotland of contemporaneous landscape painting in the Low Countries. Flemish and North Netherlandish painters were active in Scotland.



Fig 6 Detail of the earliest painting of Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1565, in which both colvers on the ice and curlers are represented. It is remarkable that several Scottish historians are of the opinion that both games, Golf and Curling have their ancestors in the Low Countries

Detail of the painting 'Hunters in the snow' – Google Art Project: KHM, Wien.

In the 17th century, hundreds of winter scene paintings with skaters and colf players were produced by famous painters like Bruegel (Fig 6), Avercamp, Van de Velde and many others.

It could well be that such paintings came also on the Scottish market and that they were seen and studied by James Stalker and that he used such a presentation for his work in Skelmorlie Aisle in Largs. Still it is rather peculiar that in a mausoleum in faraway Ayrshire in West Scotland the continental colf game on ice was depicted, a game unknown in Scotland. If the supposition that Stalker was inspired by 'winter scenes with colvers on the ice' is somewhat questionable, could it be that Stalker saw Netherlandish (fishermen) colvers playing colf on the ice on the Firth of Forth or Duddingston Loch near Edinburgh while waiting for a favourable wind to return home?

However, if indeed the painter and his commissioner chose the Low Countries 'winter scene' for a reason we do not know, the Skelmorlie Aisle 'hyems' painting is the only Scottish picture by a Scottish painter of the Flemish or North Netherlandish game of colf played on the ice.

Is it a Golf painting?

Golf is 'Scotland's game'. The game probably developed on the east coast of Scotland in the West Lothian, Tayside and Fife region around Perth, Edinburgh and St Andrews and found its way in the course of the years into West Scotland. Wouldn't it be obvious that the game of golf being a winter game was portrayed in the Skelmorlie Aisle?

In the 17th century, aristocrats like Sir Montgomerie were not so much golfers as they were hunters or archers. James Stalker had been an apprentice painter in Edinburgh where golf as they say was extremely popular; he certainly must have seen people playing the game on Leith Links. Perhaps he himself played the game during the winter season. It could well be that he used the images of the golfers for his 'hyems' scene in the Skelmorlie Aisle ceiling. But did Stalker see golf players on the ice? Could it be that golfers during the Little Ice Age, like the colvers in Flanders and the North Netherlands, played their game on the ice of Duddingston Loch, the Firth of Forth or on other frozen waters?



Fig 7 Anonymous, 'View of St Andrews from the Old Course', c.1740 – The R&A, St Andrews, Scotland

It is generally accepted by most golf historians that the 'View of St Andrews from the Old Course' painted around 1740 by an unknown artist (Fig 7) is the oldest known depiction of golf in Scotland, albeit that David Hamilton in his 'GOLF, Scotland's Game' (1998) dates the painting in the late 1600s.



Fig 8 Edinburgh Castle with golfers in the foreground. – Paul Sandby in 1746 or 1747 –
© Trustees of the British Museum

The St Andrews painting is followed by Paul Sandby's drawing (1746/1747) from Edinburgh Castle with figures playing golf on Bruntsfield Links in the foreground (Fig 8). Paintings from continental colf date from the 16th and 17th centuries.

However, if indeed the painter and his commissioner chose an Edinburgh winter scene with golfers playing on the ice, the Skelmorlie hyems scene is the earliest depiction of golf in Scotland, more than hundred years earlier than the famous 'View of St Andrews' and the drawing of Bruntsfield Links.

Is it a curling painting?

Curling, Scotland's ain (own) game as it is called is a Scottish team game in which players slide heavy stones towards a target. Team mates use 'brooms' to manipulate the direction and the speed of the stone. The game developed at the beginning of the 17th century during the Little Ice Age.

In the introduction of his book 'CURLING: an illustrated history.' David B Smith states that for centuries in Lowland Scotland the game of curling was played on loch, river and pond around Edinburgh, Stirling, Perth, etc., whenever there was ice.



Fig 9 So far the oldest picture of men playing the game of Scottish curling. – Anonymous, 'Curling', c.1700. According to 'BBC Your paintings' the picture is from the 'Dutch School'.
Oil on panel, 56 x 98 cm. – Traquair Charitable Trust

The oldest depiction found so far is the so-called 'Traquair' painting, dating probably from around 1700 (Fig 9). It shows several well-dressed men playing the game of curling. Unfortunately the artist is unknown as it is also not clear where it was painted and where the scene in the painting is. The Traquair painting is on display at Traquair House near Innerleithen in the Scottish Borders, south of Edinburgh.

The curling historians have not found ancient references to the game in West Scotland. That does not mean that curling was not played there at the beginning of the 17th century. The absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence.

While curling was played on the frozen waters around Edinburgh where Stalker worked, it is more than probable that he knew the game, has seen the game and perhaps even played the game himself. Is it a reasonable thought that he used the image of curling players he had seen in Edinburgh in the Hyems painting in Largs?

If this reasoning is correct it could mean that the curling painting is the earliest Scottish picture of the game of curling. It is remarkable that not in the past, nor today references are made to a curling painting in Skelmorlie Aisle. Even the curling historians have not mentioned this picture in their history books.

The mysterious painting at Largs: does it represent Netherlandish colf on the ice or is it the oldest picture ever of Scottish golf or is it the oldest picture of Scottish curling? Which ever game is the 'winner', it will have some interesting effects on

the knowledge of the history of the Scottish 'stick and ball game' or the 'broom and stone' game.

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