

# THE (UNOFFICIAL) HISTORY OF CROQUET

**T**here is no reference in Genesis to croquet having been played in the Garden of Eden, but that did not deter the sculptor Tullio Lombardo from creating his Renaissance masterpiece depicting Adam taking croquet.

The first known reference to croquet having been played in antiquity is a carving in an obscure corner of the temple of Kom Ombo in Upper Egypt, which depicts croquet being played in a form that is still recognisable today. In fact, croquet seems to have been a popular sport in ancient Egypt and was played by the pharaohs, some of whom had mallets, hoops and balls entombed with their mummified remains so that they could play croquet in the afterlife.

There are references to croquet in classical Greek literature in the writings of Homer and it may even have been played in the ancient Olympics. There are also references to croquet in Cicero's letters, which intriguingly refer to the difficulty of playing while wearing a toga. However, no record exists of croquet being played in Britain before the Norman Conquest, suggesting that the Romans did not export the game to Britannia.

The Normans introduced croquet to Britain, as depicted in two of the panels in the Bayeux Tapestry. This shows the game being played on foot and on horseback, the latter possibly being the precursor to polo. The mounted version appears to use larger hoops and balls. The mallets had handles made from yew with oak mallet heads, while the balls were

also made from oak and painted, although the colours, which relied on the availability of natural dyes, were more muted than the modern day equivalent. Yew trees are poisonous to livestock and were therefore grown in churchyards, being the only fenced area in the village, but they were in demand for making bows in the medieval period and the source of wood for mallets subsequently died out. There is an intriguing reference in Anglo-Norman literature to their favourite mid-game meal comprising melted cheese on toasted bread, called croquet monsieur, as croquet was an exclusively male preserve at the time. This was later abbreviated in the medieval period to the more familiar name that we know today.

The game appears to have disappeared until it re-emerged in the 17th century as pell-mell or palle-malle, which was played in what is now Pall Mall. This is often cited as the beginning of croquet in Britain, ignoring its 11th century origins.

**| David Graham**

