

Belgium, Indoor Open Championship Genva, Belgium 3rd - 4th January 2009. Report by Brian Storey

With most of Europe gripped in freezing weather conditions over the last week end of "12th night" there are not many places available to host an International Open Croquet Championship.

The sunny climes of Australia and New Zealand, the warm breezes of South Africa, the sultry heat of Egypt, or the southern states of the USA are all places that can and do provide such facilities, but they are not in Europe, so what is a "local" to do.

Continue shooting practice in the hallway or garage perhaps, practice jumps over the family cat or dog, possibly incur the wrath of a partner by clanging a small gap carefully laid between saucepans on the floor. Yes, all is possible to the artful "rough" croquet player but it would be better to have a proper place with like minded opposition too.

That is where the Chateau du Lac Hotel, Genva, Belgium and the Argentine salon comes into its own. Situated a few kilometres south of Brussels, Genva is a sleepy place with the Hotel bordering a small lake. In fact the Belgium Croquet Association has its headquarters here playing on a single lawn at the lake shore in summer.

However, in early January, the lake is frozen sufficiently to allow skaters, bike riders, sledgers, and assorted others, to enjoy themselves on the 7 cm thick ice. That and white conditions, provided the perfect chocolate box backdrop to 10th Belgium Indoor Open.

Attracting 12 players, of various abilities, from Belgium, France, Scotland, Isle of Man and England the field was nevertheless strong with top ranked player and twice champion, Samir Patel leading the way.

The much maligned old carpet with swirly pattern and ball hiding abilities had been consigned to the dustbin. This year the hotel had

provided a new carpet which, those in the know decided, was markedly slower than the previous version and which was largely a gigantic leopard spotted surface. This feature did make it difficult to find a designated spot to land on when approaching a hoop or a ball to roquet. A moment distraction and the spot was easily lost.

With the courts slightly larger than a regular half court, the actual playing surface was not flat either and had all the characteristics of reasonable lawn with little "burrows", and on one of the two courts, a significant slope.

As usual the Belgium CA, led by John Swabey and assisted by a small army of helpers provided excellent hospitality with court side drinks and lunches being readily available.

But the most remarkable thing about the event was how sturdy the hoops were. They were set at one eighth of an inch and consisted of nuts, welded to mild steel plates with steel uprights screwed into them. They were unforgiving, rejecting anything "unclean". That and the local law of "those who break a hoop have their turn end" were sufficient to ensure regular changes of turn in any case.

Played to Advanced 20 points rules (run hoop1 and place partner ball clip on 1 back), with conventional lifts at 1 back and 4 back, baulks extending to hoops 1 and 3, it was not a trivial experience at all.

But it was great fun.

After a full days play the four semi-finalists in the main event were from three different countries with Patel of England leading the way. On day 2 he dispatched Dourthe of France whilst Town of England was locked in battle with Hopgood of Scotland. It was to be an all England final and for the third time in six appearances, Samir Patel took the title. He was by far the most skilful player at the event, rarely seemed troubled and with his shooting ability was easily able to regain any lost innings. To underline his superiority he also won the peeling prize by a large margin.

Meanwhile the consolation one ball event was won by Arthur Forbes of Belgium.

During the event a gala dinner took place with communal singing of croquet ditties written by John Swabey and leading to a common feature at such events, the frenzied timed dice throwing Xmas parcel selection game, with eventually seemingly a present for everyone.

More great fun.

After the event, the heavens opened and down came 8 - 10 cm of snow creating an even larger lasting impression on those that saw the Genval Jet D'eau, rising imperiously out of the cold lake surface.

So, what to make of this event? If you are looking to hone your autumn skills ready for the new season, dusting off cobwebs, seeing new places, enjoying good hospitality in a friendly environment, this is for you.

The tournament attracted a number of spectators from the Brussels Croquet Club and a large contingent came from Germany to watch the whole event.

Spaces will always be limited so make sure you apply early for 2010.

Did I mention it was great fun?