

The Romans played it, the French reckon they invented it, the Irish say they brought it to England. It's not cricket, but croquet. **Jacqui Morley** reports

# Hoop hoop hooray

**F**orget Wimbledon. At South Shore Tennis Club, at Midgeland Road, Marton, they are courting a different game.

And it's a whole new ball game for many of those involved.

Croquet. As promoted by Fylde Croquet, which has 25 members, including several players at England competitive level.

Such is the success of the first beginners' course organised there by champion player Liz Jones – another one starts any day.

It started with free taster sessions earlier in the year, followed by courses proper. And now those first timers are moving into pastures new – association croquet.

If you think croquet is all about jumping through the hoops, think again. "It's a game of strategy, and skill even, at its simplest level," says Liz.

And she's a player who strikes fear into the hearts of those further afield, pegged at 12th in England out of 100 female players. "At one point I was up at ninth," she says.

Two words which strike fear into most hearts are "bridge" and "maths" – and Liz has recruited two novice players from both fields.

Bill and Hazel Winter, former maths teachers, learned about the croquet open day at their bridge club – and decided to try.

Both are already hooked on the association game which is, says Liz, "more to do with manoeuvres and tactics than the golf croquet game." She's already added to the silverware this summer.

"It's a lovely way of getting out and keeping fit, and doing something that's fun and makes you think," says Hazel.

Bill, a chess player, enjoys the strategy. "You don't make a move without thinking about it first," he explains. Hazel admits that he's the "better player" but adds: "For the time being..."

The Croquet Association likens the difference between golf croquet and association croquet to the difference between draughts and chess.

Not that golf croquet's a doddle. Yes, you have to hit a ball through a hoop with a mallet weighing about 3lb, but those balls are only half an inch smaller than the width of the hoop.

In golf croquet there's a sequence, each player tries to get their ball through each hoop first. Once the hoop is scored, players move on to the second hoop and so on.

There are six hoops. Generally it's the simplest and fastest version of the game. But it's still "aggressive," stresses Liz who's clearly a highly competitive player.

Liz picked up love of croquet from her dad,

and took her own kids to a summer school at Lancaster University.

Liz, Fylde Croquet's North West Federation of Croquet Clubs representative, likens the game more to snooker. "There are similar tactics, you try to block your opponent and suchlike."

In association croquet a large number of different strokes are used to achieve various aims. Once one ball is struck ('roqueted') it allows two further strokes – the croquet stroke, where the player's ball is placed next to the ball roqueted and both are struck, and a continuation stroke, in which another ball may be roqueted or a hoop run. In this way, breaks are established, and some players can get a ball through every hoop in one turn. In association croquet, both of a player's balls have to go through every hoop (each is run in both directions).

If that sounds far too complicated here's the good news. All of Liz's first batch of beginners have thoroughly enjoyed it. They include Bart and Ann Ball, who we catch up with on a rare sunny evening picking up the finer points under the watchful eye of another first-rate player, Catherine Morton.

Both enjoy walking, but Bart's passion is fly fishing – and he says croquet gives them time together. Six weeks after starting the course both are determined to stick with it. "It's fun, it's competitive, and it's also very sociable," says Ann. "There's great rivalry between husband and wife too."

Catherine concludes: "The greatest thing about croquet is you can play it at pretty much any age. You don't have to be marvellously physically fit, but relatively active, and it will improve your level of fitness in no time."

Croquet is said to have been introduced to England from Ireland in the 1850s, but its origins go back far further.

The 17th century diarist Samuel Pepys watched a game very similar to croquet being played by the Duke of York in St James Park. It was called Pele Mele (Pall Mall), and was introduced to the court of Charles II from France.

The North West Festival of Croquet is held in Southport next weekend.

The Fylde club hosts an open tournament too. The club next plays away to Southport on July 7. The next beginners course starts Wednesday, 6pm to 7.30pm. For details visit [www.fyldecroquet.co.uk](http://www.fyldecroquet.co.uk) or email Liz Wilson on [Liz@palnet.co.uk](mailto:Liz@palnet.co.uk).

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**ALL ABOUT STRATEGY:** New player Ann Ball lines up a croquet shot

PICTURES: ROB LOCK



**PICKING UP TIPS:** Bart Ball and Catherine Morton discuss tactics and, (left) organiser Liz Wilson prepares to teach the finer points of the game to the latest recruits

**I**t's been another weird week, so join **WILLIAM WATT** for a round-up of the strange stories in the news from the past seven days...

**IN LIFE** you'll be asked for quite a few favours by your close friends, but one guy in New York has taken it a little too far.

He asked his mate to shoot him in the leg, because he wanted to know what it felt like.

Police said 25-year-old Shawn Mossow gave in to his friend's repeated requests and shot him once, in the right leg.

The victim is expected to make a full recovery. Mossow was charged with reckless endangerment.

Staying in America, a Florida woman hired a taxi to take her to a store – and then tried to use it as



a getaway car after she robbed the shop of \$320 (£205).

The woman was caught as she ran out with the money, only to discover the cabbie had flagged down a policeman. He thought she was about to disappear without paying the fare.

Elsewhere, overweight Pakistani police officers have been given until the end of the month to shrink their waistlines below 38 inches, or get off the streets.

A Punjab police spokeswoman

said the province's police chief was determined to "turn the force into a fit one." Police doctors will measure the force's 175,000 officers at the end of the month. Oversized ones will be taken off operational duties.

Back at home, a former soldier has taken the plunge for charity, as he aims to break a world record by staying underwater for five days.

Ex-Royal Engineer Mark Colman, is aiming to stay submerged in a water tank for 120 hours in a bid

to raise £500,000 for Veterans in Action (VIA).

It is the first time he has dived for more than a decade, after he lost a friend in an underwater accident.

Next up, proof that you don't have to be clever to gain a position of power. A Labour education spokesman was mocked after a maths blunder in the Commons.

Kevin Brennan, a former economics teacher, said three in 10 pupils got good GCSEs in 1997 but claimed that was 60%.

It was an attempt to attack Michael Gove's ability at maths, but it backfired, and led the Education Secretary to say percentages were not Labour's strong point.

Next up, a man in India upset over his daughter's lifestyle

chopped her head off with a sword, and then paraded it through his village.

Police said the man was upset by her having affairs with men, and became enraged when she eloped with one of them two weeks ago.

And finally, gamblers at a roulette wheel in a Las Vegas casino were astonished to see the number 19 come up seven times in row. According to reports, the odds of that happening are 144 billion to one.

If some bold gambler had left a 10 dollars bet to accumulate seven times, he or she would have won \$643bn (£412bn).

**MONDAY:** Taking Stock with Rob Stocks

