

# THE HISTORY OF SNOOKER



The game of snooker was invented by Neville Chamberlain in 1875. Everyone knows that. At least this is today's commonly accepted theory...

Prior to 1938 there was an equally accepted theory that the game had been introduced by a "Colonel Snooker" of the Royal Artillery. Then came the momentous day when Sir

Neville Francis Fitzgerald Chamberlain at last responded to the umpteenth letter speculating on the game's origins and staked his own claim, which was published in *The Field* on 19th March 1938. This was apparently provoked by another claim in the same magazine, that the game had been invented at "The Shop", a term used to describe the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich.

Neville Chamberlain waited for an amazingly long time before revealing himself as the Father of the game. Despite unremitting speculation on the subject since the game became popular in England in the late 1880's, Chamberlain waited until he was in his 83rd year to reveal that he created the game of snooker in 1875, some 63 years previously!

However, there are some serious inconsistencies in the account provided by Chamberlain which could benefit from closer examination.

## THE EARLIEST REFERENCES

The earliest contemporary reference to snooker which can be accurately dated comes from the weekly issue of the *Straits Times* (Singapore) on 25th October 1884. This reproduces correspondence first published in *The Englishman* at a prior date, not given.

"A Darjeeling correspondent sends a copy of the rules of a new game called "Snookere", which he ventures to prophesy will soon supplant both Pool and Pyramids in every club and messroom throughout the northern provinces. Its nomenclature would indicate a transatlantic origin, but it has travelled from Ootacamund to these breezy heights and has speedily become very popular with cueists of all degrees of strength."

Despite the uncanny prescience of the writer, the article in the *Straits Times* does not give a detailed description of the game, but another, more detailed account of a game of "Snookers" appears in a letter written on 2nd February 1886 by Captain F. Sheldrick while berthed at Calcutta. This ancient mariner was Master of the s.s. *Oriental*, a passenger and general cargo steamer operated for the British India Steam Navigation Company, which ran a regular coastal route from Rangoon to Madras. In this letter he describes a game already popular at his club in Rangoon (Burma), which was directly under the control of the British Army in India at that time, as follows:

"At our club in Rangoon we play a game called Snookers a first-rate game, any amount of fun in it, especially if one of you get snookered (sic). The way it is played is the same as Shell-out but you put in the Yellow, Brown, Green & Black balls, if you take the Yellow it is double the ordinary life, if the Brown treble, if the Green four times, & if the Black 5 times as much as the ordinary life, of course you must pot a red ball in before you can play on one of the other beggars but sometimes you run in of (sic) one of them and got to pay up the price of the ball it is 2, 3, 4th or 5th ball. You ought to start that game old man it will take first rate I should think with lots of young fellows, it is just the same as shell-out only these other balls are put on the spots up the centre of the table."

The gambling element involved in Sheldrick's game gives a clue to the reason for its rapid rise in popularity. Imagine playing a game of snooker with perhaps 10

participants, where for every point you scored, you were paid £1 by each of the other players! The variation in the value of the balls appealed to both the skilful and the lucky in a way which could not be matched by any other Pool game being played on a billiard table at that time. Even this strange version has characteristics which clearly link it to the modern game having a pyramid of reds to which was added Yellow, Brown, Green & Black balls which were “put on the spots up the centre of the table”. There are additional references which appear to take Captain Sheldrick’s game back to 1884 when it was being played elsewhere amongst the British Army in India. The first reliable reference to the game of snooker being played in England comes with a promotion of the game, together with a set of rules, introduced by Burroughes & Watts in 1889, and reproduced in a book by Maj-Gen A. W. Drayson, which is easily recognisable as the modern game. Drayson says “This game, which is not as yet generally known, or much played, is an amusing extension of the game of pyramids.”

## CHAMBERLAIN’S GAME

The similarity of the above games to the version played today is important because the game described in Chamberlain’s letter to The Field is not even remotely similar to modern snooker. Describing events in the Officers’ Mess of the 11th (North Devonshire) Regiment of Foot, at Jubbulpore in 1875, he says:

“One day it occurred to me that the game of black pool, which we usually played, would be improved if we put down another coloured ball in addition to the black one. This proved a success, and, by degrees, the other coloured balls of higher value followed suit.”

There is a fundamental problem here which requires an understanding of the types of game played on a billiard table at that time. Next to billiards, the most popular game on a billiard table would have been “Pool”. This game derives from the earliest form of billiards which had only two balls (no red) and the players would each take a ball and try to pot each other. Pool was (in 1875) a game which would regularly involve up to a dozen players, each having their own cue-ball and taking turns to try and pot each other in a fixed rotation. Those potted would lose a “life” and pay a monetary forfeit. After losing a number of “lives” a player was eliminated from the game. To differentiate between each player’s ball, they were first numbered (in pencil) then coloured by staining with a dye. The range of coloured balls, and the sequence they were played, were initially: White, Red, Yellow, Green, and Brown. The Blue, Pink and Black balls were subsequently added to this series and would have been available around this time. Additional players could be added to the game by starting this colour rotation again with balls marked by a “cross” or “spot”. A number of variations of essentially this same game were played. Amongst these was the “Black Pool” mentioned by Chamberlain. This varied from the basic game only in that the black ball was neutral. It was placed on the centre spot and a player would be entitled to shoot at it only after he had potted his allocated ball.

It becomes apparent from this, that there are two major problems with Chamberlain’s description of the birth and development of the game of “Snooker”. Firstly, there is no single cue-ball used, with each player using one of the balls on the table as his own, and secondly there is no reference to a pack of red balls. It may be assumed that the reds were added later had not Chamberlain said that the balls added were of a “higher value” and significantly, the red ball was already established in the sequence of the Pool, being the very first colour to be used in the standard sequence.



## THE PYRAMIDS VARIATION



There were many other variations of Pool games being played in 1875, which were distinguished by the basic principle of each player using his own cue-ball. However, there was also a completely different game called "Pyramids". This involved 15 red balls being placed in a pyramid formation in the same position as modern snooker, and the players shared a single cue ball in trying to pot the reds. The same game was sometimes called "Shell-out" when more than two players were involved and it is this game which Captain Sheldrick mentions in his letter. Pyramids, or shell-out, has the two basic features missing from Chamberlain's game—the single cue-ball and the pack of reds. There can really be no doubt that the game evolved from this source and not Black Pool.

## THE COMPTON MACKENZIE CONNECTION



So why was Chamberlain's claim not questioned more closely at the time it was first published? The answer is that it received some very influential support from the famous author and playwright, Compton Mackenzie. Shortly after Chamberlain's letter appeared in *The Field* Mackenzie wrote to *The Billiard Player* reproducing the claim and leaving it in no doubt that it carried his full support, describing it as "incontrovertible evidence". The letter which appeared in the April 1939 issue of the magazine, received a similar endorsement by the Editor, Harold Lewis, so effectively closing the discussion. It will be noticed that Mackenzie had seen it prudent to change the words in Chamberlain's original letter to *The Field* so that instead of Chamberlain adding "other coloured balls of higher value" we are now given to understand that "others of different values were gradually added". It is not inconceivable that Mackenzie knew exactly what he was doing in making the change, the only passage in Chamberlain's original account which was altered.

Mackenzie had a good knowledge of pool games, having his own table at his home on the Isle of Barra in the Hebrides, where he regularly entertained friends with a game of "Indian Pool" more commonly known as "Slosh". He must surely have researched the story and been satisfied with its authenticity? Well, perhaps, but if so, he certainly didn't devote much time to the exercise. His autobiography tells us that Mackenzie only learned of the claim in the early part of 1939 when details were given to him by Mr John Bisset, the Chairman of the Billiards Association & Control Council. Chamberlain had apparently written to the BA&CC to register his claim and the papers had lain on Bisset's desk for some time while he was wondering what to do with them. In January 1939, Bisset invited Compton Mackenzie to present the trophy to the winner of the World Professional Snooker Championship at Thurston's Hall on 4th March 1939 and shortly afterwards passed on Chamberlain's letter which he felt would provide Mackenzie with some interest for his speech. There is a suggestion that Mackenzie may at least have spoken with Chamberlain. He says in his autobiography, "I was able to promise the old veteran that I would give the true facts". However, this momentous meeting with one of the most famous people in England has not passed into the family history. Enquiries with modern-day descendants of the Chamberlain line revealed that

although they are aware of his claim to have invented Snooker, the story of a meeting with Compton Mackenzie, if it took place at all, has now been lost. This apparent lack of investigation into the claim does not totally discredit the Mackenzie account, but it certainly raises some questions as to just how “incontrovertible” we should consider his evidence.

## CHAMBERLAIN’S NEW GAME

Part of Mackenzie’s evidence, presumably amongst the documents passed to him from John Bisset, were a number of letters supporting Chamberlain’s claim from military personnel, obviously with similarly long memories. The strange thing about these letters, which refer to the period between 1884–86, is that they state that Chamberlain was promoting a game of Snooker which appears to be essentially the same as the one described by Captain Sheldrick during his visit to Rangoon in 1886. Here is a transformation from the “Black Pool” variation to the “Pyramids” based game, and Chamberlain is connected with both!

It is crucial to accept at this stage that the original game could not have evolved into the new one, and the more one studies the differences in these games, and the associated billiard table games at that time, the greater will be the conviction that this statement must be true. There is also supporting evidence for this from the references supplied by Chamberlain himself. In September 1873, he joined the 11th Regiment of Foot, which was at that time based at Subathu, near Simla, and was under the command of his uncle. The regiment was moved to Jubbulpore at the start of the monsoon season in 1875, and it would seem that almost immediately upon his arrival at the new base, Chamberlain, still just 19 years-old, first christened his game. The following year this regiment would return to England, but Chamberlain remained in India, in July 1876 being assigned to the 1st Central India Horse in Goona (some 200 mile North-West of Jubbulpore).

If we are to believe Chamberlain’s account, his variation of Black Pool became immediately popular. He wrote “Officers in other regiments at Jubbulpore followed suit with the game in their messes.” This uptake in popularity seems to relate to the period immediately prior to his transfer to Goona, and quite possibly the changes, making it recognisable as the game played today, took place during this time. However, one of the references produced by Chamberlain in 1938, from Major General W. A. Watson, (at one time Colonel of the Central India Horse), would seem to refute this. He says, “I have a clear recollection of you rejoining the Regiment in 1884. You brought with you a brand new game, which you called Snooker or Snookers.” Not, it will be noticed, “when you first joined the regiment in 1876”. The game of “Snooker”, despite Chamberlain’s claim to have invented it in 1875—and for it to have been readily adopted throughout the region—was apparently unknown to this regiment before 1884! As Chamberlain says he took Snooker with him when he joined the Central India Horse, where it “met with the approval of my new comrades,” it would appear that after his departure two years later, it was quickly forgotten. If further proof were needed that his Black Pool game was not remotely like modern snooker, it is surely certain that had his old regiment returned to England with any recognisable version of the game in 1876, it would have become known from that date, when in fact it was over a decade later that snooker first appeared in England, and this was the “Pyramid” version. It is clear that at some point Chamberlain discarded his Black Pool game, and embraced another, giving it the same name. The question now becomes, did he invent this new version game as well, or did he adopt and rename a game which already existed?



## CHAMBERLAIN IN INDIA

We can make a reasonable guess at when this change is most likely to have happened by looking at Chamberlain's military career in India. Chamberlain was certainly well connected in military circles following an established family tradition in his choice of career. Although billiard tables were quite common in India, most regiments having one in their officers' mess, they were not supplied by the British Army. Rather, it was left to the officers of a regiment to obtain and pay for such items themselves. Something that most were prepared to do in order to alleviate the boredom of their assignments. However, this did not extend to taking them along on military campaigns, and the first of these presented itself to Chamberlain in 1878 when he was involved with the outbreak of hostilities in Afghanistan, which bordered India to the North.



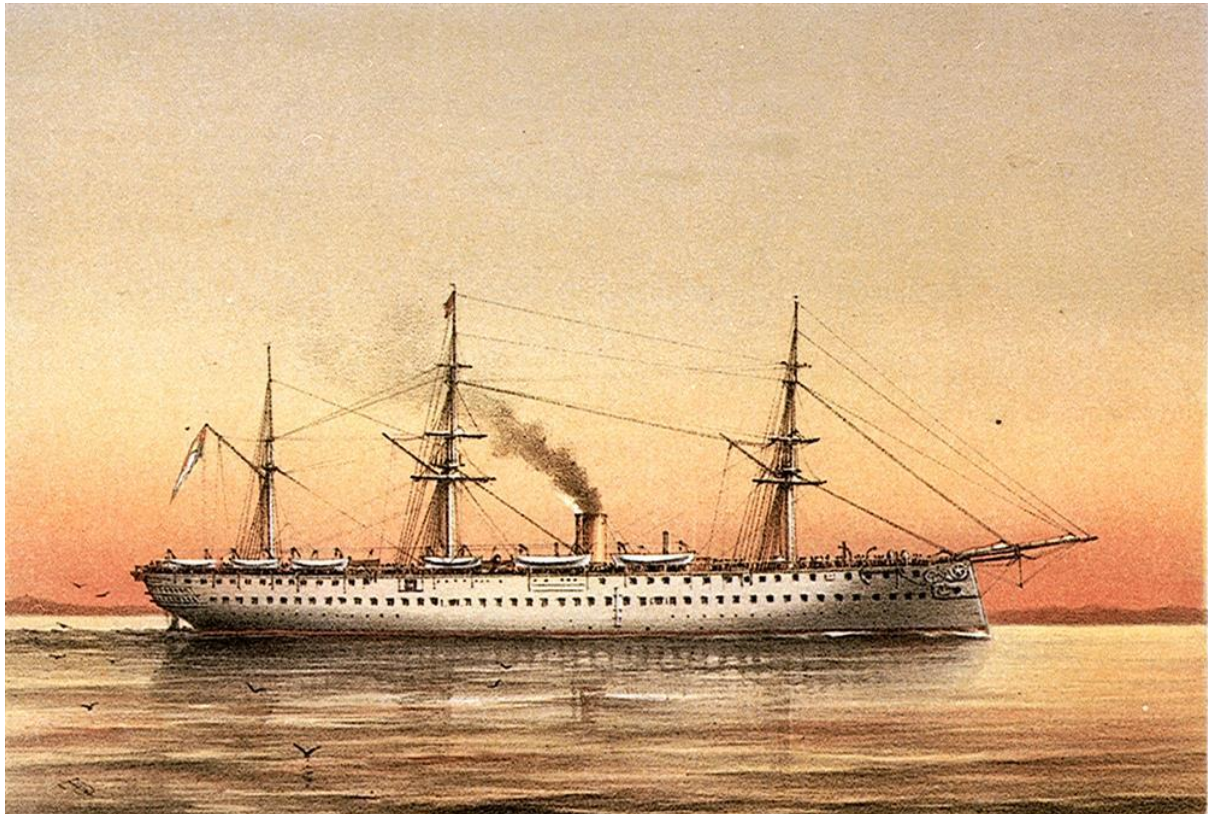
L-R (Standing) - Col. Stewart; - Maj-Gen Godfrey Clerk Adjutant-General; - Lt. Neville Chamberlain ADC; - Capt. Ian Hamilton ADC; - Col. du Caine RA.  
(Seated) - Sir Fred Roberts; Lt.-Col. - George Pretymen, Military Secretary.

In November of this year Chamberlain was assigned to the personal staff of Field Marshal Sir Frederick Roberts, who was Commander-in-Chief of the combined British forces in Afghanistan. Chamberlain's position on the staff was as an Orderly Officer who came under the aide-de-camp Captain Pretymen of the Royal Artillery. This is an important connection to which we shall refer later. We can say with some certainty that during the 2½ years of this campaign Chamberlain would not have seen a billiard table, much less played upon one. The entire Army, including the commanding officers, lived in tents during this period and would not have transported such items with them even if it was feasible to do so. Additionally, the Afghan Nation was of the Muslim religion and as Field Marshal Roberts tells us "possessed of a fanatical hatred

of all things European”. So even when the Army captured and based themselves in the Afghan capital, Kabul, they would have been unlikely to discover any billiard tables waiting to provide them with entertainment.

Chamberlain, keen to be part of the action had been allowed to rejoin the Central India Horse in the closing months of the campaign, and received a “slight wound” on 1st September 1880 at the decisive battle of Kandahar. The forces under Roberts disbanded almost immediately after this and returned to India.

Chamberlain was granted a 12 month furlough and returned to England on board the troop carrier HMS Crocodile which departed Bombay on 31st March 1881. This arrived in Portsmouth a month later on 30th April 1881.



HMS Crocodile

Towards the end of his period of leave, Chamberlain was re-appointed to Roberts' staff as an Aide-de-camp. Roberts, who by this time had been promoted to Commander-in-Chief of the Madras Army and his staff also included Lieutenant-Colonel George Tindal Pretyman, R.A., (Assistant Military Secretary), and Captain J. Gordon of the 2nd Battalion, Royal Irish Fusiliers (Aide-de-camp). The latter was on temporary assignment from the staff of the Governor of Madras, pending his replacement by Captain Ian Hamilton, the Gordon Highlanders. Unlike the others, Hamilton was based in South Africa and was unable to join Roberts' staff immediately. Hamilton, probably correctly, considered his appointment to be linked to Roberts' desire to write his memoirs, and felt that the real intention was to recruit him as a “ghost writer” for this work. It was a task that Hamilton didn't want, and successfully avoided doing, although Roberts did eventually complete his two-volume autobiography, which was entitled “Forty-one years in India”, without the help of Hamilton, in 1898.



Chamberlain and Pretzman met up with Roberts while still in England and they all returned to India on board the P&O steamer Australia on 26th October 1881. They docked at Madras on 30th November, and after staying there for a couple of weeks, travelled onwards, via Bangalore, to their new headquarters at Ooty, arriving on the evening of 23rd December 1881. It is likely that Capt. Gordon was already at Ooty when they arrived. Gordon was known to have an important connection to snooker which will be examined later.

The hill station was specifically equipped for recreation, having a climate almost identical to that found in England it provided an escape from the summer heat of the cities. With the Commander-in-Chief of the Madras Army now based there, it would see many more visitors during the pleasant summer months, both British Army personnel and civilians.

This group would remain at Ooty for little more than a week, Roberts setting off on his first tour of the Madras army on 1st January. The route took in all the principal garrisons, initially returning to Madras before taking passage to Burma, then travelling through Calcutta and the Central Provinces, and returning to Ooty on 25th March 1882.

Ian Hamilton arrived at Bombay in June 1882 and immediately travelled to the hill station. Significantly, Hamilton, with whom Chamberlain became "bosom friends" as he describes it, seems to be of the opinion that the game was already established when he arrived. A letter he wrote to the Field in 1938 contained the following passage:

"I have never doubted that my old friend, Sir Neville Chamberlain, invented the game of snooker. I was at Ootacamund in 1882-84, and there must still be some of that very crowd left who can testify to the belief then current, that snooker owed its birth to Neville Chamberlain's fertile brain."

This letter was in response to a suggestion that the rules were drafted by Lord Kitchener, however, his support of Chamberlain's claim does not read as though it was based on any first-hand knowledge. From this, we can not only confirm that the birth of the game was some time before his arrival, but also, and importantly, discount any involvement by Hamilton in this process. Could the game have existed at Ooty even before Chamberlain's arrival, just waiting for him to discover it and give it a new name? This is certainly a possibility. Chamberlain acknowledges that a game based on "Pyramids" was formalised there, writing about his later travels in India he says:

"We were constantly asked on our travels to show how the game was played. It took but little time to demonstrate this, for everywhere they knew how to play Pyramids, so we showed them how to add the other coloured balls, and told them the simple rules for the game, which had been prepared by our committee at Ootacamund, in 1882."



The Ootacamund Club

## THE BURMA CONNECTION

A long the same line of thought, another possible source of the game's origin suggests itself. We know from Captain Sheldrick that snooker was being played in Rangoon in February 1886 – could it have originated here and been discovered by Roberts' staff during their first visit to that country in January 1882, and taken it back to Ooty? Rangoon, although not exactly isolated, could certainly have harboured the game without discovery for a longer period than the popular hill station of Ooty. It was one of the furthest outposts of the British in India and the garrison stationed there would not have had a great number of visiting officers from other regiments. Typically, the trip from Ooty to Rangoon would have taken at least 10 days (seven days and nights by train and three days by ship from Madras)

Ian Hamilton implies that snooker was being played at Ooty in June 1882. Significantly, Roberts and his staff, including Neville Chamberlain and George Pretymann, visited Rangoon for the first time in February 1882, and could therefore have brought the game back, and had it firmly established at Ooty prior to Hamilton's arrival there in June. The problem with this theory is that the game being played in Rangoon in 1886 was clearly being called "Snookers" and if it had existed there under a different name, then they would surely still have been playing it under that name.

## ENGLAND: THE BIRTHPLACE OF SNOOKER?

It has been established beyond reasonable doubt that Chamberlain could not have started to promote the Pyramid version of the game before leaving for England at the end of March 1881. He would arrive in England on 30th April 1881 and remained there until 26th October, when he joined Roberts and Pretymann on board the P&O steamer Australia for the voyage back to India. This gives us a period of almost six months which he spent in the country. Could Chamberlain have invented, or seen the new version of his game while in England?

Prior to Chamberlain staking his claim in 1938, there had been plenty of speculation in the English press on the subject of Snooker's origins, most of them pointing to the inventor being a "Colonel Snooker" of the Royal Artillery—although the rank of this officer is also sometimes described as "Captain" or even "Major"—and the birthplace was commonly referenced as being the Royal Military Academy in Woolwich. If these reports are to be believed, the game was being played in London well before Chamberlain's return in 1881, in fact at least one claim says it must have existed there as early as 1865. However, in his book 'The Shop' The Story of The Royal Military Academy, Capt. F. G. Guggisberg recalls that the first billiard table was installed there in 1868. Although this still gives plenty of time for the game to have been established, the book, published in 1900, does not mention Snooker being amongst the games played at the Academy. It does however confirm that this was the name given to the first term cadet by the older cadets "who were apt to despise them."

Based on the popular growth of the game after its first definite reference in The Sporting Life in 1887, it seems highly unlikely that the game could have remained hidden in the heart of London for any length of time, and certainly not long enough to have predated the claim of Chamberlain.

It is, however, possible that Chamberlain developed the game at some serviceman's club whilst in England on leave. In later life he was known to have been a member of "Naval and Military Clubs" and this would be just the type of establishment which is likely to have seen the first game of "Snookers" in London. But the odds are against Chamberlain being the person to introduce it. In Chamberlain's letter to The Field he mentions that "In the eighties rumours of the new game had reached England". A strange statement if he had personally introduced it to his London club in 1881.

In fact we know from the letter of Captain Sheldrick that the game was still not well-known in England in 1886, while it had become well established in India. This seems to confirm that the game did not start in England.

## WHAT IS A SNOOKER?

It is generally accepted that the term "Snooker" as applied to the game, came from a name given to a first-year cadet at the Royal Academy at Woolwich. This would appear to have been in use in the early 1870s, Chamberlain having first been made aware of it in 1875. But where did this term actually originate? Dictionaries tell us that the use of the phrase "Cock a Snook" first appeared in print as early as 1791 and it has been suggested that the novice recruits earned their name by their habit of cheekily "cocking a snook" at their non-commissioned officers. This "carry-on" image of military training at this time hardly bears scrutiny.

Another offering was made by Lt.-Col. G. L. H. Howell, late R.A. who stated in a letter to the "Billiard Player" published in 1939 that the term was: "time's corruption of the original word for a newly-joined cadet, which was 'Neux'." (e.g. "Nooks," "Snooks," "Snookers.") A rational deduction perhaps, and probably a correct one, but there is



also an intriguing, and certainly more colourful alternative.

In the 1850s there was a comedy duo called “Hooker and Snooker” who were performing in the London theatres during the earliest days of the Music Hall variety acts. Could it be that Mr. Snooker’s character was sufficiently inept that his persona was sarcastically applied by one of the older cadets to a hapless junior at Woolwich, and the name stuck? Unfortunately, this can be little more than guesswork, as extensive enquiries reveal nothing more about Messrs. Hooker and Snooker (real names Messrs. Widdicombe and Shepherd) other than a few newspaper reviews. Still, there remains the faintest chance that these now forgotten thespians gave the world a legacy which far transcends the fame achieved in their own lifetime.

## INDIA’S CLAIM TO FAME

As the alternatives are eliminated, we are left with the Hill Station of Ooty as the most credible birthplace for the game of “Snookers”. From the other evidence available to us, we can also date this event fairly precisely as being after Chamberlain’s return to India in November 1881 and the arrival of Ian Hamilton in June 1882, when he confirms that the game already existed.

For the same reasons as we eliminated the Royal Military Academy in Woolwich as secretly harbouring the game, so we must dismiss the thought that the game was already established at Ooty when Chamberlain arrived. This was not a hidden outpost, but a facility which was regularly visited during the summer months by the entire Madras Government, who would transfer the whole process of the civil and military administration to the hill station for half the year. If Snooker had existed for any length of time before Chamberlain’s arrival, it would certainly have already spread from this source, under whatever name it may have been called.

This is what Chamberlain had to say of this period:

“Each summer that delightful hill station had many visitors, either to hunt with the ‘Ooty’ pack of hounds or for a change of climate. Among them were officers from such big garrisons as Bangalore, or Secunderabad, as well as cheery planters of Mysore or Coorg, who rode up for a few days of gallops over ‘The Koondas,’ or a time of good cheer. Snooker soon became a speciality at the club, and, in due course, the news of it was carried far afield, and to billiard players throughout India.”

Significantly, Chamberlain also clearly states that the game was introduced at the time of his arrival, and not by him alone, but with the assistance of others. He writes,

“I had the great privilege of being on [Roberts’] personal staff, and, with other members of it, we soon introduced the game at the club at Ooty.”

The “other members” who are credited by Chamberlain as being involved with this introduction were, as previously stated, Lieutenant-Colonel George Tindal Pretymann, R.A., Captain J. Gordon, and subsequently, Captain Ian Hamilton.

Ian Hamilton discounts himself from any involvement by his own writings, but Captain Gordon’s connection seems stronger. It seems that he was sufficiently taken with the game that in August 1883 a reference appears in the Indian newspapers to a racehorse called ‘Snooker’ owned by a ‘Mr Gordon.’ This would suggest a deep connection to the new game which would have been barely known, even in India, at that time. Although this person is a different individual to our Captain J. Gordon, it would seem that he was

likely to have been a relative, as we find that the same horse subsequently passes to the ownership of Captain Gordon in 1884.

So from Chamberlain's statement it would seem that the "introduction" of snooker at Ooty was by himself, Captain Gordon, and George Pretyman. By crediting other members of Roberts' staff with the introduction of the game, and the evidence that Captain Gordon was more than likely to have been one of them, he effectively identifies two possible periods when this could have happened: the week between 24th–31st December 1881; and after the return of the staff from their first expedition with Roberts on 25th March 1882 and the arrival of Hamilton in June 1882. This period may be extended slightly, as Roberts remained based at Ooty "during the hot season" and Hamilton, who admitted to having limited private funds, was known to deliberately avoid the officers' mess for fear of running up undue expenses.

Gordon had not accompanied Roberts on his tour of the Indian garrisons, instead having been granted leave to remain in Madras on "private affairs." In fact he does not rejoin Roberts' staff at all, but instead he takes up a post as Aide de Camp to the Governor of Madras, M. E. Grant Duff. In his new capacity, he returned to Ooty and would certainly have been there when Chamberlain and Pretyman arrived back in March, subsequently remaining at the hill station for some time as the Madras Government relocated its headquarter for the summer.

It will be remembered that Chamberlain and Pretyman had become acquainted during the Afghan War when both were members of Roberts' staff. If the game of "Snookers" had existed at Woolwich, albeit with a different name, then Pretyman would presumably have known of it. Could Chamberlain have married the name of Snooker to a game known to Pretyman? The main problem with this theory is that Pretyman graduated from the Academy back in 1865, three years before the first billiard table was installed. Similarly, if the pair had discussed and agreed the format of the new game during the Afghan War, then surely Chamberlain would have taken the opportunity to try it at the London clubs while back in England.

The most likely scenario is that Chamberlain and/or Pretyman, developed the game after their return to India in December 1881. If we accept the involvement of Captain Gordon, this must date the event to their return to Ooty on 23rd December 1881 which is the first time that all three men were together. Which one of them actually first thought of adding pool balls to the pyramid set we will probably never know, but we can be certain that Chamberlain was involved to some extent, if only to give it the name he had first coined in 1875.

It is clear from many references that the game spread throughout India after 1882, the correspondence from Darjeeling in 1884 clearly references Ooty as a source, while others credit Chamberlain directly.

## THE RELUCTANT HERO

Why did Chamberlain wait so long to announce his claim? Many would say that this suggests that he had a limited involvement in actually inventing the modern version of the game. By all accounts he was certainly an enthusiastic advocate for the game between 1882 and 1886. We know from the references produced by Compton Mackenzie that he was credited with personally introducing the game to at least four different regiments in the Madras Army, between these dates. In 1885 he was happy to claim to be the inventor of Snooker, having been introduced in that capacity to the English professional player in that year. This makes his later reluctance to reveal his involvement all the more mysterious.

After leaving the personal staff of Roberts in 1884, Chamberlain's military career really

took off. He became a Lieutenant-Colonel in 1889 and the following year was appointed Military Secretary to the Kashmir Government, responsible for reorganising the Kashmir Army. In 1899 he left India and followed Field-Marshal Lord Roberts to South Africa where he was again part of his personal staff. The following year Chamberlain left the Army and moved a little closer to home when he was appointed Inspector General to the Royal Irish Constabulary, a position he retained until his retirement in 1916. During this time he maintained a residence in Ireland at Castleknock, Co. Dublin.

It could be that during this period he hardly noticed or cared about the growth in snooker and the questions being asked about its origins, but after retirement he moved to Ascot in Berkshire where he remained until his death on 28th May 1944. Here he must surely have been aware of the game's growth. Even as a member of "Naval and Military" clubs which he admitted to frequenting, he must have seen the game being played with increasing frequency.

However, it should be remembered that another likely candidate, George Pretymann, also remained silent on the subject. Pretymann left India and returned to England in November 1894 where he remained for five years on the "unemployed list", then at the outbreak of hostilities in South Africa he again took up an appointment under Lord Roberts. He retired from active service in 1907, and died ten years later at the age of 72. This gave him plenty of opportunity to join the debate had he wished to do so.

## **INTRODUCTION OF SNOOKER TO ENGLAND**

There is another fallacy associated with Snooker, and that is the idea that the famous billiard player, John Roberts junior, introduced the game to England. In his letter to The Field, Chamberlain references a meeting with an English professional "I think it was in 1885" with to whom he explained the rules of the game, saying "I regret I do not remember his name; he was probably a contemporary of John Roberts and W. Cook." Although Chamberlain cannot exactly recall the date of the meeting, he does leave some clues, saying,

"I was dining with my hospitable and valued friend, the Maharaja of Cooch Behar, in his beautiful house in Calcutta. After dinner he took us to the billiard room and introduced us to a well-known English professional billiard player who had come to India for a few weeks to give him lessons in billiards."





In a book published by the Maharaja of Cooch Behar in 1908, there is a record of a meeting in Calcutta between himself, Lord Frederick Roberts, Neville Chamberlain, and others, prior to them all setting out on a big-game hunt which commenced on 28th February 1885. This almost certainly gives us the date of the meeting with the English professional to within a few days. Shortly after the appearance of Chamberlain's letter, Mr. F. H. Cumberlege also wrote to *The Field* to give his opinion that "the professional must have been John Roberts himself who came out to Calcutta in 1885."

The idea that this person was the Champion billiard player seems to have been readily accepted, but unfortunately Mr. Cumberlege's memory seems to be faulty. The itinerary of John Roberts during 1885 made it impossible for him to have been in India at the end of February 1885, or indeed any time that year. Nor would Chamberlain be likely to forget being introduced to a player who was not only famous, even in India, but also bore the same name as his commander-in-chief, who incidentally, was likely to have been present at the same gathering. Additionally, anyone who has studied the career of John Roberts would know that having obtained such a marketable commodity he would have promoted it with vigour. Yet Roberts never even mentions the game of Snooker, and there is certainly no record of him playing it until many years after it had become established in England.

In fact the earliest connection between John Roberts and snooker comes from his son, John W. Roberts, who wrote to the *Billiard Player* in 1938 saying that his father had been introduced to the game whilst touring America towards the end of 1893. He says of the American game

"the balls were of the usual American size, round about 2½ ins. or 2 5/8 ins., the six coloured balls (ivory) were numbered on both sides of the white portion, the middle of the balls having deep coloured bands' yellow 2, green 3, brown 4, blue 5, pink 6 and black 7. The usual 15 red and the player's ball included the set." He continues, "My father was so taken up with this game that he not only brought over a set of these balls to England, but he also brought over three American players, Slossen being one of them; I think Ives was another. The first game of snooker which I witnessed by these American players caused some little sensation at the time, but what delighted the audience most were Slossen's trick shots."

This surely removes any thoughts that John Roberts had discovered the game in India eight years previously.

So who was it that Chamberlain met in India in February 1885? This was a momentous year for billiards as it saw the formation of the Billiard Association as the governing body for the game, and all leading professionals, except two, can be accounted for as being present in England during the whole of the year.

The first of these exceptions was Fred Shorter who left England some time around November 1884 on a three month journey bound for Australia; a trip from which he would not return. He was suffering from tuberculosis and had been advised to take a long sea voyage, ironically it appears, by John Roberts himself. Shorter had toured India several times before, and it would be reasonable to speculate that he had stopped there again during the passage. However, it is known that he arrived in Sydney on 14th February 1885 by the clipper ship, *Peterborough*, where, despite his illness, he was sufficiently well to play a number of public matches promoted by Henry Upton Alcock the famous billiard table manufacturer. However, the route of this particular ship did not include Calcutta, indeed it sailed via South Africa and avoided India altogether; the dates also ruling him out of a possible meeting with Chamberlain at the end of

February.

The only other leading professional who could have met Chamberlain, and was known to have been in India at the time in question, was the extravagantly named Sackville West Stanley. After establishing a reputation as a front-rank billiard player in England, Stanley had toured India and the Far East for more than three years between 1878 and 1881. Here he played many exhibitions and built a lucrative trade as tutor to local Princes and wealthy potentates.

After a brief spell in England, where he was recovering from a severe illness, he returned to India in 1883. Whilst there, in 1884, he met with a bad accident on the Dacca Racecourse, and was severely injured. His long convalescence was known to have taken place in Calcutta and around this time he was appointed by the Maharajah of Cooch Behar as his personal billiards tutor. He received a generous salary in return for giving the Maharajah lessons in billiards, and playing occasional exhibitions for the entertainment of the Maharajah's guests. It therefore seems certain that S. W. Stanley was the billiard player who met with Chamberlain and obtained a copy of the rules of snooker's pool, although what he may have subsequently done with them is not clear. He remained in India until 1887 at which time he returned to England.

Stanley had apparently grown tired of billiards and ignored the game for several years after his arrival in England, deciding instead to pursue a career as an actor, a talent which he had first discovered when in Calcutta. However, this change in lifestyle did not prove to be as successful as he hoped, and he returned to billiards in 1890. In the interim, it was the billiard table manufacturer, Burroughes & Watts, together with professional players linked to this firm, William Cook and John Dowland, who became associated with the early promotion of the game in 1889. This may not be entirely coincidental, and it is more than possible that Stanley, sold, or otherwise passed the rules of snooker to Burroughes and Watts, and so began the process of bringing snooker to public attention.

There is little doubt that the rules of the game, published by Burroughes and Watts, was essentially that being played by Chamberlain in India, having four pool balls spotted along the centre line of the table. The name they gave it, "Four Jolly Snookers," being reference to those balls.

## **FRANK MEERTON'S CLAIM**

Following the surge of interest created by Compton Mackenzie's article in the *Billiard Player*, another letter appears in the May 1939 issue of this magazine from Frank Meerton, who claimed to have facilitated the introduction of Snooker into England. He writes:

"In 1892 I was billiard marker at Ingam's Hotel in Manchester. One morning in that year a military officer on leave from India entered the billiards room, asked for pyramid and pool balls and offered to show me a new game called Snookers Pool. He told me it was a new game played among the officers in Calcutta and that it had been invented by one of the officers a short time before. I wrote out the rules from his dictation, went to see Mr. Acland, manager of Messrs. Burroughes and Watts, and gave him a copy. He offered to get them printed and so also did Messrs. Orme's to whom I gave a copy. At that time there were only four coloured balls, yellow, green, brown and blue—pink and black were introduced later."

Meerton had a long career as a billiard marker, and was quite an accomplished player, having reached the final of the Liverpool Professional Championship in 1891, and subsequently challenging for the championship of Ireland. The Liverpool



championship was organised by Charles Acland, who was manager for Burroughes & Watts' branch office in Manchester.

It is not clear why Mr. Acland, upon receipt of these rules, did not inform Mr. Meerton that Burroughes & Watts had previously published them three years earlier. Perhaps the Manchester branch and London head office did not communicate as effectively as might be expected, or perhaps the game had not become sufficiently widely known, even amongst Burroughes & Watts' management. Whatever the reason, and assuming that Meerton has accurately recollected the date of this encounter, his claim must be dismissed as being the prime source.

## CONCLUSIONS

The good news for those supporting the claim of Neville Chamberlain as the inventor of the game of snooker, is that despite some extensive research on the subject, no evidence has been found which confirms the existence of the game before the timescales offered by Chamberlain, or for it being played in any part of the world other than India until well after these dates.

The main problem however is that there appears to have been two completely separate versions of game. The idea that one evolved naturally from the other is too much to accept as a credible concept and it can only be concluded that they must have been devised independently.

Of course, Neville Chamberlain may have been the sole author of both, and he certainly seems to have been involved with promoting first one, then the other version. The evidence, as supplied by Chamberlain himself, appears to be quite strong that he invented a "Black Pool" version in 1875, but is much more tenuous when it comes to the Pyramids version (the modern game) which we can trace back with reliable evidence only as far as 1882.

The weight of probability suggests that the metamorphosis between the two versions—at least as far as Chamberlain was concerned—actually took place at the Indian Hill Station of Ootacamund, either in the last week of December 1881, or during the summer of 1882 (25th March to October). Chamberlain himself does not claim that he was solely responsible for introducing the game to "Ooty" also crediting by implication, Lieutenant-Colonel George Tindal Pretymann, R.A., and Captain John Gordon, Royal Irish Fusiliers. All three candidates were present at Ooty through these two periods, and there is currently no evidence which would allow these dates to be further narrowed.

Although it might be tempting to dismiss the week in December 1881 as being too short to be of consequence, that it falls in the period between Christmas and New Year is significant. It would be a time when the clubhouse at Ooty was full, and the demand for the billiard table at its greatest. What better time for a novelty form of pool, which could take any number of players, to make an appearance?

Of the candidates, it is appealing to link Pretymann to the early stories which attribute the game to a "Captain" or "Colonel Snooker" of the Royal Artillery although not all of the pieces fit comfortably in this theory. He certainly meets the key link with the Artillery, having been a graduate of the Royal Military Academy in Woolwich. He was a Colonel at the time we think the game first appeared. He would have been travelling with Chamberlain and Hamilton as their senior officer, visiting the same regiments until 1884 when he left Field Marshal Roberts' staff and thereafter could have promoted the game independently. But even if George Pretymann turned out to be the fabled "Colonel Snooker" this would just establish a connection with the game of which we are already aware, and not give us any new evidence that he was the inventor. Captain Gordon, was almost certainly involved in the early development of the game,

and was probably present at its birth. To be sufficiently enthused to name a racehorse 'Snooker' when the term would have been largely unknown outside the habitués of military messes, suggests a certain pride that points to an intimate involvement. His early death in 1887 at the age of 36, in no way diminishes his claim, which must be considered at least as strong as that of Pretyman.

Was Chamberlain telling the whole truth about the extent of his involvement with the game? We must assume so. He was 82 years-old at the time he eventually wrote his letter to *The Field* and it is difficult to think that he had any incentive other than to relate all the facts as he remembered them.

Everything considered, the available evidence points to it being one of three people: Neville Chamberlain, George Pretyman, or John Gordon, who took the game of pyramids and suggested adding pool balls with different values. Which one, we will probably never know. We can however, be reasonably confident that the name of "Snooker" was adopted from a suggestion by Chamberlain.

So perhaps Colonel Sir Neville Francis Fitzgerald Chamberlain deserves a place in history as the inventor of the modern game of Snooker, and perhaps at this distance in time this is as close to the full story we will ever come.



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Peter Ainsworth (EASB Historian)